

RECORD OF WORTENIA WAR



Author: **Ryota Hori**
Illustrator: **bob**



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"We should
have done
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before things
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this."

"Yes,
perhaps.
But I do
think that
this would
be our most
efficient
course of
action."





**"He really
did go for
the throat."**

The next moment, Vector thrust the tip of his blade toward Ryoma's throat, focusing all his force into that single motion.

**It was a powerful
attack, executed with
ungodly speed.**



Lione cracked a smile and placed a hand on Laura's head. "What's wrong? Ain't everyday I see ya this tense."

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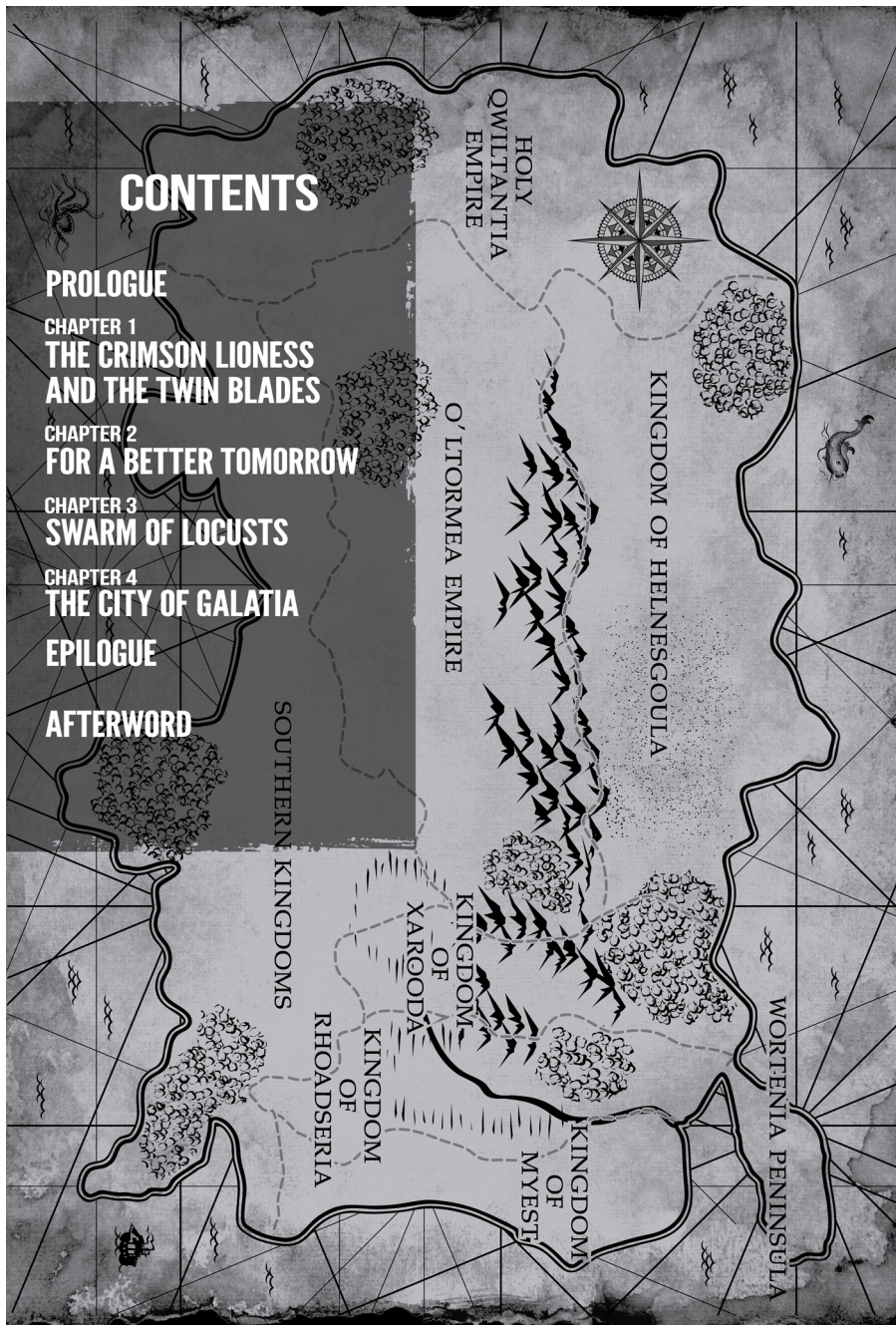
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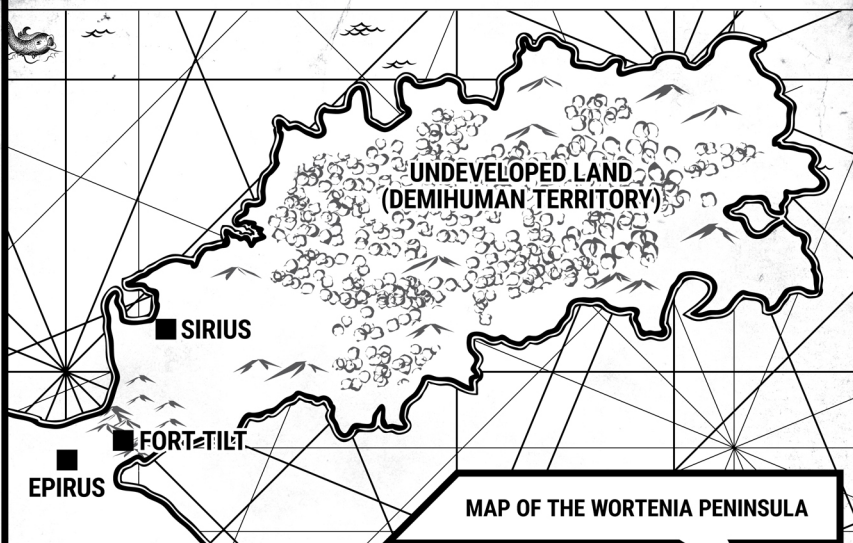
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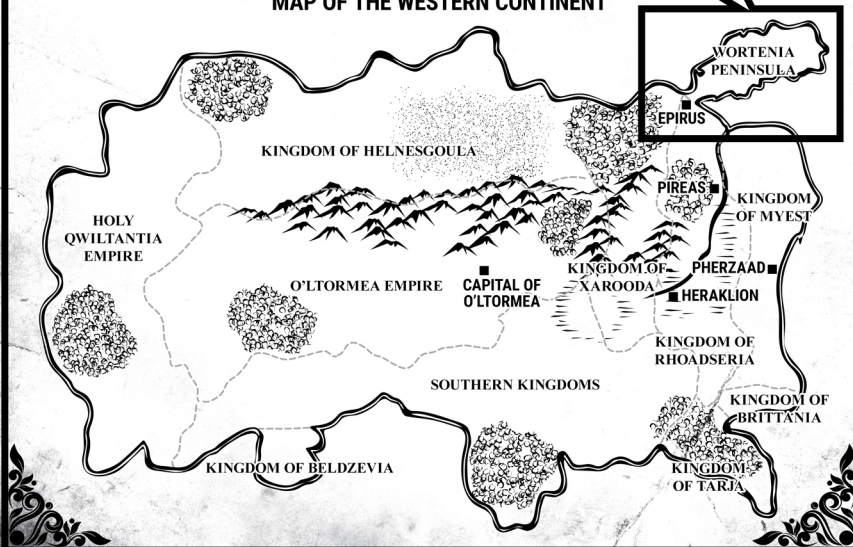
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Prologue

The Kingdom of Rhoadseria's royal castle was located in Pireas, the capital city. In a room in that castle, two women stood opposite each other, separated by a table with a map spread on it. The time was three in the afternoon—the perfect time for tea.

The sky outside the window was thankfully clear. Beautiful and fragrant flowers bloomed in the castle's garden, which the royal gardeners tended to meticulously. Had the two women had the time to relish the head cook's prized cookies along with a cup of tea, it would have surely been a pleasant afternoon. Unfortunately, neither could enjoy a break.

One of the women was the sovereign of the country, the young Queen Lupis Rhoadserians. The other was her most devoted knight, Meltina Lecter. Both were exceptionally beautiful, but their grave expressions soured their fair features.

Their anxiety was understandable. If the news they'd received yesterday from a spy in the north was true, then hostilities had opened near Epirus several days ago.

"We should have done something before things got out of hand like this," Queen Lupis said, a deep sigh leaking from her pink lips.

There was only sadness in her voice, a concern for her subjects embroiled in the fires of war. It would deprive them of property and fortune and, in some cases, even their lives. Queen Lupis deeply regretted the decisions she'd made, the choices that had driven her people to this crisis. This was an unusual reaction, though, for someone in the ruling class. Most nobles were deaf to the cries of their subjects.

Meltina's heart shook to see her mistress react with such sorrow. She appreciated Queen Lupis's love for the people, but she disapproved of her indecisiveness, which had prevented Lupis from making the necessary choices. Complaining about it now would have been pointless, however. Lupis had always cared for the commoners despite her royal status. Her kindness defined her reign as a queen, for better or worse.

"Yes, perhaps we should have done something, Your Majesty," Meltina said. "I agree that this is far from ideal. The people of the north will see their peaceful lives crumble away. This will no doubt affect the entire country. But at present, I do think that this would be

our most efficient course of action.”

Lupis directed a sorrowful glance at Meltina. They had already agreed to this. Meltina had drafted this plan to rectify the situation, and it had cost a great deal of time and manpower. There was no stopping it now.

Honestly, I have my qualms about the war in the north as well, but...there's no other way.

Meltina felt the same as Queen Lupis, but it was too late to change it. If someone were to ask Meltina for her stance as a knight, she would have unflinchingly obeyed Queen Lupis. A country should never expose its subjects to danger, and it should never willingly sacrifice them either. That was what Meltina believed, now that she had authority over Rhoadseria's internal affairs and its military.

With Helena Steiner, the greatest warrior in Rhoadseria, now stationed at the Xaroodian border to observe the O'ltormea Empire, things were different. Meltina wasn't just a mere knight right now. Helena was absent from the castle, so Meltina was managing the knights in her place. That meant that Rhoadseria's public order and national defense were also Meltina's responsibility.

If we're going to hold on without sacrificing anyone, this is the best solution. But...

Meltina now understood that this ideal was only available to those with absolute strength. She had been forced to realize this. Her strength was limited, so such ideals were out of her reach.

A knight's pride... It's important, yes. But that's not enough to protect anything or make anyone obey. It was so simple, yet I didn't understand. That's why I couldn't get anyone to acknowledge us.

Meltina recalled how she had insulted and shouted at court officials. Whenever she thought back to it, her face would go red with shame.

I might've been too occupied to notice it at the time, but I found fault with everyone. Of course they dislike me now.

Emotion brewed within Meltina. Her peers no longer regarded her favorably. No, it was worse than that. They disliked her. She had been striving to do better recently, but most of the governing bureaucrats still viewed her with aversion. And in a sense, they were right to do so. There was a time when all she did was point out their faults.

But I've changed. I know I have.

The higher one's position, the greater the burden of responsibility. If one gained power beyond their means, they could end up in a situation where the strain of their position was too much. That described Meltina's behavior earlier this year. She had suspected everyone below her of being disloyal traitors. On top of that, Queen Lupis had placed great expectations on her, adding even more

pressure. She had been, for all intents and purposes, cornered by her role and its responsibilities.

But the arrival of one letter had changed everything. It was a letter from Helena, informing the palace that she'd be garrisoning a town by the Xaroodian border in preparation for a possible reinvasion. At first, Meltina had expected Helena to rebuke her for her ineptitude, but by the time she finished reading it, she had been shocked. After the customary greetings, Helena had expressed her gratitude to Meltina and included a tale from her younger days about a personal failure, as if she was sharing a funny anecdote.

Why did she send me that letter?

Meltina still didn't know the answer to that question. She'd sent Helena a letter thanking her, but she hadn't heard back. Maybe the country's bleak state had stirred up some kind of parental affection in Helena. Or maybe, being an elderly woman whose days were numbered, she had felt compelled to interfere in a younger protégé's business. Whichever it was, Helena's letter had opened Meltina's eyes.

Recently, people were gradually acknowledging Meltina's devotion to work. Still, it would take years to completely overturn the bad reputation she'd made for herself. She had left too many negative impressions. It wasn't just with the bureaucrats either. Even the knights, who would normally be dependable allies, were cold with her. The reason for that was clear; they envied the affection and trust Queen Lupis directed at her.

I should have found the right time to speak with Her Majesty about this. I knew that.

Meltina could understand the knights' displeasure with her, and she even knew how to elevate it. People like Mikhail and Meltina had been Queen Lupis's confidants for many years, so promoting them to important positions seemed like the natural conclusion. Elevating people she couldn't trust to positions of power was a risk, no matter how qualified they might have been.

It was often said that having incompetent allies was worse than having capable enemies, but rulers were prone to promote people they could trust, even if they weren't the most capable. People could grow into a role and become more skilled given enough time. Building trust, however, was much more difficult. Trust was the fundamental reason Queen Lupis had banished Ryoma Mikoshiba to the Wortenia Peninsula.

All things considered, Queen Lupis's trust in Mikhail and Meltina was understandable. In most circumstances, it would have been a positive relationship. But that wasn't the issue here. The issue was whether Meltina's peers believed she had the skills to match the queen's trust.

As a knight, I'm confident in my swordsmanship, but...

Meltina didn't think she was qualified to lead others. If she had been, she wouldn't have butted heads with those around her so much. It was only natural her self-esteem would plummet. But the truth was that Meltina wasn't as poor a leader as she made herself out to be. There were many people more confident than she was, but even more were worse than her. This might not have meant much to Meltina, but she was better than most people in her role.

But despite her skill, Meltina had one critical shortcoming: she lacked leadership experience. Meltina and Mikhail were both skilled in martial matters. Meltina might not have spent much time on the battlefield, but she always ranked high during the martial tournaments in the capital. She'd even beaten Mikhail in a few official duels in the presence of the royal family. The two of them were among Rhoadseria's finest knights.

Unfortunately, this was also the reason behind their intense sense of superiority, and the reason they turned to their martial prowess to solve problems. People were suited for some things and ill fitted for others, and one person couldn't address every single issue with the same approach.

I hope I've become a bit better.

Helena's letter had taught Meltina one simple fact: not even Helena Steiner, Rhoadseria's fabled Ivory Goddess of War, could hope to save everything. It was a truth Meltina, who greatly respected Helena, hated to admit. But Helena's frank, almost confessional letter had changed something within Meltina.

Helena's calm, collected face surfaced in Meltina's mind. Everyone in Rhoadseria respected and admired this heroic knight. It wasn't just the knights either; commoners and nobles alike all looked up to her. One couldn't help but revere this tragic heroine who had elevated herself from a mere commoner to the rank of general.

Meltina idolized Helena, and it had been her lifelong aspiration to become a knight like Helena. Meltina's admiration even matched her loyalty to Queen Lupis. The first time she met Helena, Meltina had been terribly nervous and too overcome with emotion to speak. So seeing this side of the woman she revered so much had changed something within her.

But while some part of Meltina didn't want to know Helena's opinion on the current situation, she was anxious to find out.

Would Lady Helena support this decision? Wouldn't she say there's another way?

That doubt shackled Meltina's heart. She was confident that her choices were the only way to save this country. She hadn't decided on them because they were the easy way out; she had reached them after

much deliberation. She'd made that choice knowingly, even if it meant bending the knightly ideals that had guided her so far.

But even after all she had done, Meltina couldn't shake her anxiety. Had she consulted Helena about it, Helena would have likely laughed off Meltina's concerns. After that, she'd have smiled and praised Meltina for being so aware, because it showed that she understood what was required of a country's leader.

Nevertheless, reaching that understanding at this point in time was a lot to ask of Meltina. She was only entering her mid-twenties, while Helena was well into her sixties. Meltina was young enough to be Helena's granddaughter, if not her great-granddaughter. Their military experience wasn't even comparable. It would take many years for Meltina to reach Helena's level as a knight. In fact, it was unlikely she'd ever become a war hero like Helena. Meltina also knew it would be presumptuous of her to think she could match Helena that easily.

Meltina kept asking herself one question: how would Helena tackle the multitude of problems standing in her way? She had faced hardships and handled them how she thought Helena would have, and little by little, Meltina had matured. And it all stemmed from her love for Rhoadseria.

Because Meltina had changed her state of mind, she felt that Queen Lupis's words were nothing but irresponsible hypocrisy. Yet Lupis's decisions stemmed from the same qualities that made her both a good person and a good ruler.

But if I say that now, it'll sound like exiling that man to Wortenia was a mistake from the get-go.

Now there was a war between the ten houses of the north, led by Count Salzberg, and Ryoma Mikoshiba—a clash between the fabled defender of the north and a national war hero. Whatever the outcome, it would be a painful blow to Rhoadseria as a whole.

As queen, Lupis couldn't ignore this war. With Rhoadseria's national power greatly exhausted by the previous civil war, she couldn't afford to turn a blind eye to this development. Queen Lupis knew this too, yet she'd chosen not to interfere. She'd had valid reasons to, of course. There was the worsening public order as well as the uncooperative nobles. The national law might have forbidden private territory disputes among nobles, but in order to uphold that law and prevent war, the palace would have to use their overwhelming military might.

For example, Hideyoshi Toyotomi, a unifier of Japan who ended the Warring States period, sought to prevent the daimyos from squabbling over territory. To do so, he enacted a law called "Soubu Jirei," a peace edict that forbade disputes among the daimyos. In so doing, he kept Japan unified under his rule.

The famous siege of Odawara Castle occurred during this unification period. The Hojo clan, who governed the Kanto region, took control of Nagurumi Castle from the Sanada clan. As a result, Hideyoshi marched an army of two hundred thousand men from all over the country to attack Odawara Castle, the Hojo clan's main castle.

Odawara Castle was a highly fortified structure that once held back the celebrated war hero Kenshin Uesugi. Relying on the castle's defenses, the Hojo clan hoped to keep Hideyoshi at bay. They holed up in the castle, but Hideyoshi's army crushed them, and his name as a military leader was sung throughout the land.

After conquering that region, Hideyoshi only had two more territories to seize—Oshu and Ushu, known today as the Aomori and Akita prefectures. The rebellion led to some issues of how to punish the ringleaders, but historically speaking, Hideyoshi managed to unify all of Japan in less than a year after that incident.

It was said that Hideyoshi's law, Soubu Jirei, brought centuries of prosperity and stability to Japan. But the only reason the law stopped the daimyos from fighting was because of Hideyoshi Toyotomi's staggering strength behind it. In fact, Nobunaga Oda and General Ashikaga made similar declarations during the Warring States period. How effective their orders actually were depended on the situation.

What separated an effective law from an ineffective one? The answer was simple. It came down to whether the lawmaker had the power to physically punish those who broke it. It wasn't at all a matter of whether the law was good.

In another example, during the Edo period, Tsunayoshi Tokugawa created a law for the mercy of living things. It was meant to protect animals, orphans, and the elderly, as well as the injured and ill. But that law tormented his subjects.

It's a famous law in Japanese history, considered foul and evil. The law originally forbade the abandoning of infants and the killing of animals. To a modern citizen, such a law would seem reasonable and ethical. But at that time, it was indeed a terrible law, and the reason was simple. The punishment for breaking it was much too harsh. A warrior by the name of Ito Awaji no Kami Motohisa killed a mosquito, and he was deemed a sinner for it.

Of course, the law never intended to say a mosquito's life was more important. The idea that all life is precious is an easy-to-grasp concept. Ito Awaji no Kami Motohisa merely felt it sting him and reflexively squashed it—a normal reaction. In most cases, it would have ended with him washing his hands or wiping them with a cloth. At most, he'd have to prepare a grave and hold a memorial service for it. The insects might not have been satisfied with it, but the crime

would be absolved. Instead, he was sentenced to exile, a verdict second only to death.

That is just one example, but at the time, such stories were rampant. Everyone wanted the law abolished, but that didn't happen until Tsunayoshi Tokugawa passed away. How just or moral a law is isn't relevant. Power is what decides these things. For as long as he lived and held the rank of shogun, no one could overturn that law.

Queen Lupis lacked the strength necessary to enforce the law forbidding nobles from fighting. And trying to interfere now could drag her down like quicksand. After all, it would mean going up against Ryoma Mikoshiba.

After a long silence, Lupis finally asked, "So you're saying we should stick to our original schedule?"

Meltina nodded.

Mikoshiba is a problem, but Count Salzberg and the ten houses of the north are an impediment to Her Majesty.

Ruling from Epirus, a citadel city at the heart of the northern regions, Count Salzberg's duties included dealing with the monsters from the Wortenia Peninsula and guarding the northern borders. But for many years, Count Salzberg used this role as a pretense to ignore the king's summons.

The nobles of the ten houses, who united under Salzberg, were just as vile as he was. They had refused to act during the civil war, which had proved their disloyalty to Queen Lupis.

Count Salzberg had accepted Meltina's order to investigate the Wortenia Peninsula, implying he did have some loyalty to the crown, but based on his temperament and past actions, the truth was quite different. The order had simply given him just cause to inspect his new neighbor, which he only did to protect his own vested interests.

Besides, Count Salzberg has...

Meltina remembered a rumor that had been going around Rhoadseria's aristocratic circles.

I don't know the details, but the fact that these kinds of rumors about him are spreading suggests he's a fairly problematic person. Even Duke Gelhart had to think twice before crossing him.

Very few people knew the truth about the rumors. The topic was taboo among Rhoadseria's nobles. But exactly because it was taboo, people kept spreading the rumor. Queen Lupis was no exception. It had piqued her curiosity.

"Are the rumors about Count Salzberg true?" she asked.

Meltina shook her head. "I don't know. But if they are, he's committed patricide."

"There's no smoke without fire, you say?"

"We don't know the truth. I don't even know if the House of Lords

ever investigated it.”

There was absolutely no evidence that the House of Lords, which supervised Rhoadseria’s nobles, had looked into the matter. But a lack of records didn’t necessarily mean that there had been no investigation. It could have been forcibly stopped somehow.

“But those rumors began during the reign of your father, His Majesty Pharst II,” Meltina added. “They’ve been circulating all these years, long after Salzberg inherited his father’s title. There must be some reason for it.”

Rumors were nothing more than hearsay, and judging a person based on that alone was dangerous. But if a rumor persisted long enough, there could be some truth to it. If nothing else, it wouldn’t remain relevant without some kind of basis to it. Between the rumors Meltina had heard about Count Salzberg and the information she’d gained herself on the man, she had concluded that he was definitely guilty.

Sensing that Meltina was convinced of this, Queen Lupis sighed. “I see. So how do you see this developing?”

“Well, rationally speaking, it’s impossible for Ryoma Mikoshiba to overcome Count Salzberg and the ten houses. He did send quite a few soldiers during his dispatch to Xarooda, but his army can’t be that large.”

Ryoma Mikoshiba had led several hundred soldiers in the expedition to Xarooda. Since he was a baron, and it was possible that all those soldiers were knights who could use martial thaumaturgy, Ryoma’s army would be much larger than a noble of his standing should have. The same could be said of Count Salzberg, however. House Salzberg was the old clan that had guarded the northern regions since before the kingdom’s founding. Because of that lofty justification, House Salzberg’s domain was allowed to grow larger than that of a simple count.

House Salzberg alone had an army that was nearly the size of a duke’s, and the ten houses of the north were reinforcing his ranks as well. Count Salzberg also had the Twin Blades—Robert Bertrand and Signus Galveria—at his beck and call. No matter how many tricks Ryoma used within the Wortenia Peninsula, Meltina didn’t think he had the means to overturn this difference in strength.

Count Salzberg is a problematic man surrounded by dark rumors. His strength rivals Lady Helena’s, as painful as that is to admit.

Meltina was confident in her swordsmanship. There had been times when people turned their nose up at her for being a woman, but each time someone did, Meltina had proved them wrong with her abilities. She wasn’t so overconfident that she thought she could defeat the Twin Blades, though. The same probably held true for

Mikhail Vanash as well.

Ryoma Mikoshiba's army might be powerful. And he has those twins and the red-haired mercenary on his side too. However...

Laura and Sara were among his aides, and seasoned mercenaries like Lione and Boltz were in his service. Still, it was probably safe to assume that Count Salzberg had the advantage, both in his army's size and his commanders' skills.

"Honestly speaking, I wouldn't mind if either of them lost," Meltina said.

"Yes, agreed," Queen Lupis whispered.

Meltina didn't care who won the war.

If Mikoshiba loses, that'd solve a problem for us. And on the off chance he wins, we can use the war as a reason to bring him to judgment.

The same could be said for Count Salzberg. Both of them were thorns in Queen Lupis's side. Letting them kill each other off would be the best possible development for her.

Still, if we don't interfere in this war at all, other countries might look down on us.

Stopping the war was impossible at this point, and they had no desire to do so. Queen Lupis had already rejected that idea. But Meltina couldn't allow the other nobles to catch wind of this ploy.

Queen Lupis's disposition was that of a benevolent queen. That included her flaws—indecisiveness and naivete—but her kindness wasn't a negative trait in and of itself. Allowing something to tarnish that reputation could influence her regime's future.

Ideally, we need to set things up so it looks like we tried to stop the war but failed.

Doing so would give the impression that Queen Lupis had done everything she could have to help the country.

Maybe we should strike now, while we have the chance.

Like divine revelation, Meltina's mind began hatching a plot.

We need to find the right person for it. I'll have to consult Mikhail.

It was hard to say if Mikhail was at all the right person to talk to, but Meltina's idea was nothing short of illegal dirty work. She would have to choose her cohorts carefully, or it would place both herself and Queen Lupis in a very precarious position.

Aside from Queen Lupis, there was only one person Meltina could confide in. Recalling the face of her colleague, whom she'd hardly seen the last couple of years, Meltina bowed to Queen Lupis and left.



Later that night, after concluding her talk with Queen Lupis, Meltina left the palace and made her way to Mikhail Vanash's mansion. As soon as she entered his reception room, she bowed her

head and said, "I'm sorry for coming on such short notice."

This was a sudden, unscheduled visit. If they were commoners, it wouldn't be much of an issue, but both House Vanash and House Lecter were knight families. If Mikhail were to rebuke her for this impolite act, Meltina would have nothing to say in her defense. Even the butler who ushered her inside had been displeased, apparent from his frown. Even so, displaying such an attitude toward a guest was that much more shameful, so the butler had been rather rude.

Mikhail, however, shook his head and dismissed her apology. "Don't let that bother you. You're always welcome at my doorstep, Lady Meltina. I've nothing to do with my time but polish my sword skills."

Mikhail smiled sadly and gestured for Meltina to take a seat on the sofa. He grabbed a bottle of wine from one of the shelves and placed it and two glasses on the table.

"So, how can I help you?" Mikhail asked, uncorking the bottle and moving to fill her glass.

Meltina placed a hand over the glass's rim and stopped him. This signaled to him that something was off. Mikhail narrowed his eyes, recorked the bottle, and said with a dubious expression, "No time to drink? Hm... This must be important."



Mikhail was surprised. Meltina had never visited his mansion uninvited like this before.

Meltina went on to explain the war in the north, as well as her plot. Her explanation lasted some ten minutes, and when she finished, everything went quiet.

Finally, Mikhail sighed, breaking the silence. "I've heard about Ryoma's dispute with Count Salzberg. I've been wondering why Her Majesty wasn't interfering, but... Well, now I see."

There was something damning in his tone—a criticism of how Meltina had bent her knightly honor. Mikhail did understand what was driving her to do this, though. There was a time that he had also pursued his personal justice and thought of nothing but proving his loyalty. He firmly believed in the knight's path. Even now, that desire remained, but he'd come to realize that ideals simply weren't enough on their own.

"If there were some other means," Meltina said.

"Other means... Right."

They fell silent again. Conflict and regret were brewing in their hearts. But the die had already been cast.

You've changed... Mikhail thought, looking at the woman sitting opposite of him. The Meltina Lecter he knew had been a woman burning with knightly ideals, who would always abide by justice.

No, you had to change.

The warrior houses of Vanash and Lecter had served the royal family since the country's inception. That tradition had been passed down uninterrupted to Mikhail and Meltina. When compared to the Tokugawa shogunate, they were like high-ranking retainers to the shogun. Describing their relationship with each other, however, was difficult. They were colleagues serving Queen Lupis through their formal titles. Or rather, they *had been* colleagues.

Mikhail had disobeyed Ryoma's orders during the civil war, a move which had greatly damaged his reputation. He was now relieved of his duties, and all he could do was wait for a chance to redeem himself. By comparison, Meltina was Helena's stand-in. She had authority over internal affairs and public order. Regardless of their relationship in the past, Mikhail and Meltina were no longer equals. Be that as it may, Mikhail still remained a knight of Rhoadseria even after he'd lost his position, so they were colleagues in a certain sense. But that was like calling a manager and a junior employee "coworkers."

One thing was certain. Meltina and Mikhail had a connection that bordered on a familial bond. Since there were ten years between them, it was closer to a father and daughter relationship, or a much

older brother and a younger sister. For nearly twenty years, they had supported Queen Lupis together, long enough to become as close as family.

This was why Mikhail was so saddened to see that Meltina had changed so much. The fact that the situation had warped her so much weighed on him, but he knew he had only himself to blame. Looking back on his past failures, Mikhail had decided to change. Meltina, on the other hand, had changed because of the responsibility and position she held within the kingdom. Those had forced her to change.

It's all my fault. This is all because I was so impatient back then.

A scene Mikhail had viewed in his dreams numerous times came to mind. When he'd seen Kael Iruna, a man who'd betrayed Queen Lupis and joined the nobles' faction, he had lost his temper. He'd ignored Ryoma's orders and charged ahead. It had led to the deaths of many of his subordinates and his own shameful capture.

If only he'd waited and followed orders, they would have been able to hang Duke Gelhart for his crimes. That would have crushed the nobles' faction's future machinations. Everyone might have looked at him differently. Ryoma Mikoshiba would have been treated much differently too.

Perhaps we could have been comrades...

In the end, Mikhail was just heaping one convenient theory on top of another. It was nothing more than whimsy, a dream of Mikhail's where he never failed. But no amount of regret could change the past. Only the future was subject to change.

Very well, I'll play along.

That was why Mikhail decided to cooperate with Meltina's ploy. It would mean discarding his own justice and beliefs, but he honestly believed it was the way to atone for his past mistakes.

"And who's going to take on that role?" he asked.

Meltina's face hardened. She was about to ask him to find someone who'd pretend to be a messenger in Her Majesty's service—a jester hiding behind a dignified position.

This "messenger" couldn't possibly succeed. If they were to do so, it would place their entire faction in a compromising position. But by sending a messenger, they would be refuting Ryoma's claim that he was fighting for the good of the kingdom. It would solidify the fact that Ryoma was disobeying his liege's orders.

Depending on the north's state of affairs, it was possible that the messenger might be held responsible. Should the war end in a cease-fire, people would certainly inquire who had sent him. Meltina would defend him as much as she could, but she couldn't cover for him too much, lest it raise suspicion about her involvement. How to punish the messenger would be left to chance. At best, he would get demoted, but

even his entire household could be wiped out.

Meltina had to pick the messenger carefully while considering the worst-case scenario. In other words, she needed to find a sacrificial lamb. She knew that, but saying it out loud took courage.

Mikhail saw the conflict raging in her eyes. Wishing to lighten her load a little, he said, "I think I know someone who would fit the role. Leave the choice to me."

Meltina raised her face to look at him. Mikhail smiled and nodded.

"Could you?" she asked.

"Yes. But what about the letter?" If they were going to send a messenger from the queen, they'd need the queen's seal.

Meltina shook her head but didn't elaborate.

"I see," Mikhail said. "Yes, it would be best to not include a letter. We'll have them pretend to be a secret messenger, then?"

Meltina nodded.

If everything looked *too* official, it could really lead to a cease-fire, and they didn't want that. They preferred to let their opponents wear each other down. And if one side won, they would prosecute the victor. If they wanted to achieve that outcome, it wouldn't be a good idea to use an official letter with the queen's seal. A secret messenger fit Meltina's ends much better.

Is that really the best thing we can do here, though?

Mikhail felt a twinge of anxiety. He agreed with Meltina that a cease-fire wasn't a desirable outcome, but they definitely needed a letter for this. As far as he knew, Rhoadserian law demanded it.

Would forgoing the letter cause us trouble down the line?

Mikhail, a warrior by nature, never did like paperwork. When he served as vice-captain of the royal knights, he'd always asked people to handle the paperwork for him. But now that he spent his days at home, he'd started delving into fields other than tactics and combat. Much like Meltina, Mikhail had learned from adversity.

That was why he'd felt a sense of foreboding when Meltina said they wouldn't use a letter from the queen. He couldn't quite place his finger on what was making him so uneasy, though. But without knowing what was so disconcerting, he couldn't tell Meltina to stop.

I might have a bad feeling about this, but that doesn't necessarily mean much.

That was Mikhail's conclusion, based on the countless times he'd acted out of his short temper in the past. He couldn't be confident in his hunches.

Unaware of his conflict, Meltina continued, "So, Sir Mikhail, who were you considering?" She wanted to know the name of the candidate he had in mind since they would be essential to their plan.

“How about Vector Chronicle?” Mikhail offered.

Meltina immediately understood Mikhail’s choice. “Yes, I imagine he’ll accept the job eagerly, but...” Her expression clouded over with pity and regret.

“I understand what you want to say, but cold as it may be, that man doesn’t have a future. If there was anything I could do to help him, I would, but...”

Mikhail wasn’t happy about suggesting his name. But not many would readily accept such a dangerous task, and given all the factors at play, Vector was the most suitable man for the job.

Vector Chronicle was originally a royal guard, like Mikhail. But after he accepted the title of baron following his older brother’s sudden death, he had moved away from the capital, to his own domain. During his time as a knight, Vector had once served as Queen Lupis’s personal guard. Because of this, he was close with Mikhail and Meltina, who would often lock horns with other nobles.

His domain, the Chronicle barony, was located exactly between the capital and the northern regions. According to what the capital knew, the hostilities in the north were either on the verge of opening or they’d already begun. The situation had to be handled quickly, and since his territory was north of the capital, he could arrive at the frontlines much sooner.

That wasn’t the main reason Mikhail mentioned Vector’s name, however. Like he had said, Vector didn’t have a future. There was a disease in this world called Carrion disease. One of Helena’s closest aides, Chris Morgan’s grandfather, was afflicted with this illness. It stemmed from a critical depletion of prana in the body and had a small chance of occurring in severely weakened people.

There was an existing treatment for the disease, but it required expensive nostrums that could only be purchased from the central continent. Only those in power had the connections required to obtain them. But even if one were to get the nostrums, they would only cure the disease in its early stages. Once the disease developed past that, treatment wouldn’t help.

What made this disease especially awful was that it developed very slowly. Over the course of roughly ten to twenty years, the patient’s flesh would gradually begin to decay. The process was quite painful, and it continued to torment its victim until it extended to their heart.

It would mean giving him one final mission.

If Mikhail and Meltina had known that Vector had Carrion disease, they would have tried to help him before it developed beyond treatment. But it happened before Queen Lupis took to the throne. Duke Gelhart had been leading the nobles’ faction, and General

Albrecht's tyranny had been on full display. That had made it difficult for him to reach out to his comrades. Mikhail and Meltina had only learned about his illness after it had progressed past the treatable stage. Meltina vividly remembered how Queen Lupis had blamed herself and her own lack of power when she'd learned of his condition.

Sadly, no matter how much his peers lamented it, Vector's fate had already been set in stone. The only thing that remained was to either sit by and watch him die a meaningless death or grant him a chance to die as a knight in the name of the kingdom. This was a shameful task that would yield no rewards. It was certainly not a job one would give a dying friend.

But...

Mikhail was convinced that he was doing the right thing, just as he had been when he cast aside his knightly convictions and resolved to assassinate Princess Radine during the last civil war.

"Share a cup with me. At least one," he urged and uncorked the bottle again.

This time Meltina didn't stop him. He filled her glass with amber-colored wine. He then filled his own to the brim, picked it up, and raised it to eye level.

"Very well. Just one," Meltina said.

Meltina wasn't a good drinker, but this time she played along with Mikhail. The two of them emptied their glasses in one swig and slapped them back down on the table, as if paying tribute to a friend that wasn't there.

That night, a man rode out from the back of Mikhail's estate, heading north. Hidden on his person was a fateful secret letter...

Chapter 1: The Crimson Lioness and the Twin Blades

Morning dawned on the second day of the war between Ryoma Mikoshiba's army and Count Salzberg and the ten houses of the north. The sun shone brightly in the clear, blue sky, casting its warmth upon the earth. There was no weather forecast in this world, but the people knew that when the sky was like this, the weather wasn't likely to suddenly worsen.

The gates of Epirus swung open with a heavy, solemn thud, and a drawbridge slowly descended to the ground. Before long, two men appeared from inside the gates, and an army of six hundred followed behind them.

Yesterday's battle had proved that swift attacks from the cavalry were the most effective against the enemy. After all, horizontal formations were weak against the wedge and arrowhead formations. That was why they had handpicked experienced cavaliers from the ten houses' troops to follow the two men in the lead. That did skew their force's composition, but it was a reasonable choice for mobility and penetrating power. However, the only reason the ten houses' egotistical nobles had agreed to this formation was because Count Salzberg backed these two men and trusted their judgment.

"The weather isn't too bad. A fine day for a battle if there ever was one," Robert Bertrand said as he passed through the gate on horseback. With one hand on the reins, he shielded his eyes from the sun with the other and looked up.

Signus Galveria, who rode half a step behind him, also looked up. "Yes, the weather is nice, but..." Fine weather had a way of lifting one's spirits, but Signus felt something was off about Robert's cheery tone.

Right. He's not used to his weapon.

Robert was gripping a battle ax just like the one he'd used against Ryoma Mikoshiba the day prior. He had prepared a spare in case his weapon broke or he lost in battle. A blacksmith in Epirus had specially made it to match the size and length of his usual weapon.

But upon closer inspection, Robert's grip was a little different. There was a difference, albeit so small that only he could feel it, between this spare and the ax he always used. Mass-produced weapons were nearly perfect matches for each other, but handmade

ones inevitably differed. Even if the same craftsman used the same raw materials, the results would still vary on some level. A skilled artisan would minimize the variations, but a human craftsman still had their limits.

On top of that, even a weapon made by a truly gifted blacksmith would wear after continuous use, and that wear would gradually change the weapon's weight. They were minute differences, but they could mean the difference between life and death on the battlefield.

Signus was reminded of a saying he'd heard in his youth once.

What was it? 'A good craftsman doesn't blame his tools,' right?

Signus had heard this saying from Rearth from his combat instructor. The instructor had used it to teach Signus that a true master could produce the same result with any set of tools. It was a radical piece of advice, given to him so he could overcome the discrimination he faced from his family as a bastard child.

At the time, Signus had simply nodded at his instructor, no doubt in his mind. It certainly made sense. But after experiencing battle, Signus had realized that the knight was wrong.

Yes, a true artisan can produce fine results no matter what tools they use. But it still won't be their best work if they have to use subpar tools.

It was hard to say if Signus's interpretation was correct. Proverbs like that had many meanings depending on who told them. But even professional athletes had preferences when it came to their equipment. Marathon runners were particular about their shoes, and swimmers carefully picked their goggles and suits. They also deeply cared about their coaches and training environments.

However, when an artist failed to make their greatest masterpiece, they could always try again. An athlete could continually challenge their records so long as they didn't give up. War was different. Depending on the tide of battle, one could lose their life.

Considering the events yesterday, Ryoma Mikoshiba was clearly a considerable opponent. The slightest edge could tip the balance and Signus and Robert would die in combat. War was unpredictable by nature, so even if one planned for every contingency, their preparations could come up short.

"You all right?" Signus asked. It was a concise question, but it did convey his emotions. He couldn't predict everything, so he thought it would be wise to dispel any doubts ahead of time.

Robert glanced at him from over his shoulder and smirked, looking vicious and carnivorous. "Don't worry about me. I'm fine. I'm just in the mood, is all."

Robert held up his ax and then swung it down diagonally. It was a light movement similar to a warm-up strike, a simple swing without martial thaumaturgy behind it, yet the wind from it was enough to

blow a cloud of dust into the air.

“Still worried?” Robert asked.

Signus shook his head. As far as he could see, nothing about Robert’s slash felt off. The swing of his arm, the movements of his body—they were perfect.

I guess I’m a little on edge too.

Their allies felt terribly inadequate, while Mikoshiba’s army seemed immensely powerful. That coupled with the hint of unease coming from Robert was enough to cast doubt over the heart of a seasoned warrior like Signus.

Many people thought Signus was the same as Robert, but Signus was more reasonable than his comrade. They were both powerful commanders who had made their bodies into weapons through martial thaumaturgy, but Robert relied on his intuition. Signus, on the other hand, relied on facts and calculations.

As Signus tried to assuage his worry, an army of soldiers in black appeared in the distance. Like yesterday, there were roughly a thousand soldiers.

“Hm. Looks like the enemy is raring to go today too,” Robert said, a dangerous glint in his eyes.

Being the savage warrior that he was, Robert had likely caught the scent of blood on the battlefield. And in this case, Signus wasn’t much different.

Robert added, “Well, since your anxiety’s all taken care of, let’s kick off our second day of fighting, shall we?”

“Right,” Signus said. “And this time, I’ll be fighting from the very beginning. Let’s see which one of us takes that man’s head first.”

Robert and Signus exchanged looks and nodded. They took a deep breath and used the prana circulating through their bodies to activate their chakras. The Mikoshiba barony’s flags, weaved from silver and golden threads, grew larger as they advanced. They let out battle cries that echoed throughout the battlefield.



The force from Epirus charged toward Lione’s army, kicking up dust in its wake. They had somewhere between five to six hundred men. Using thaumaturgy to reinforce her vision, Lione confirmed the two men in the lead and shrugged.

“So those are House Salzberg’s Twin Blades, huh? Even if it’s the boy’s orders, fighting those two is scary.”

There were still a few miles between Lione’s army and the Twin Blades. Even with thaumaturgy augmenting her eyesight, it was hard to make out their facial features from this distance. However, a seasoned warrior like Lione could still pull it off. Her title as the

“Crimson Lioness” was well earned.

Laura, who was standing next to Lione, seemed dissatisfied.

“Lione, if Master Ryoma’s plan is to succeed, it’s imperative that we win this battle. Could you please take this a little more seriously?!”

It was highly unusual for Laura to chide Lione like this, especially because Lione always regarded Ryoma half-heartedly. Getting mad at her now would be greatly missing the point, and Laura knew this.

Lione cracked a smile and placed a hand on Laura’s head. “What’s wrong? Ain’t everyday I see ya this tense.”

By now, Laura and Lione had spent several years together. From Lione’s point of view, Laura was like a much younger sister.

“No, I’m nothing of the sort,” Laura said brusquely as she gently brushed off Lione’s hand. This was her way of asking not to be treated like a child. Still, it was clear from her voice that she was nervous.

“I can get being nervous about goin’ up against those two,” Lione said, glancing at the cloud of dust approaching them.

Though she had been smiling before, Lione’s expression was now quite grave. Laura realized that Lione wasn’t as complacent as her earlier tone had implied.

“I’ve been wondering since the briefing with Master Ryoma last night, but do you know those two, Lione?”

Ryoma’s group had heard a great deal about the Twin Blades from the Igasaki clan’s ninjas—their family structure, their personalities, and their past achievements. But Laura got the sense that Lione knew them on a more personal level.

“Well, Robert Bertrand and Signus Galveria are two of the strongest warriors in Rhoadseria,” Lione said concisely.

A mercenary made their living through war. So long as their client paid, they would battle against anyone, even if those people were friends, acquaintances, or family. Of course, mercenaries weren’t madmen who willingly chose to fight people they knew. But once the contract was signed and money had exchanged hands, they couldn’t back down just because they happened to know someone on the other side. The guild would never accept a mercenary who would do so. At best, they would beat them half to death. At worst, they’d beat them fully to death. The only way to maintain a client’s trust was to know what you were up against.

Because of that, mercenaries relied on intelligence. They always needed to know who their allies and foes were. They gathered information as soon as they could, even if it was expensive to do so. That was how they kept themselves and their loved ones safe.

“Fellow mercenaries often mentioned their names as people to be wary of,” Lione explained. “They said fighting them was suicide and I should never take a job that pitted me against them.”

Avoiding battle with an overwhelmingly strong enemy was a reasonable choice and a wise decision.

“Besides, I’ve had a long career in this line of work. A whole lot of stuff happened. Dammit, just facing those two is hard enough as it is,” Lione said, huffing in displeasure.

Ryoma had given Lione two orders. The first was to not lose under any circumstances until he returned. Lione had no issues with that order. Given who they were fighting, there could be no guarantees, but she and Laura were leading an army trained by the Crimson Lions. Most of them looked like children in their mid teens, but their skill was genuine.

In addition, they all wore the same gear, produced by and purchased from the dark elves of Wortenia. Since they’d been produced in bulk, the craftsmen had used slightly lower-grade raw materials, so their gear wasn’t as exceptional as what Lione and Laura were wearing. Even so, their armor and weapons had been blessed with the powerful endowed thaumaturgy of the dark elves. Their gear didn’t pale in comparison to a knight’s.

The other order Ryoma had given Lione was to *not kill* Robert Bertrand and Signus Galveria. Lione had complained about that one. Asking her to avoid such a specific and important target seemed almost contradictory.

“If all we had to do was hold back, there’s plenty of ways to do that. But this...” Lione whispered.

“Master Ryoma knows that,” Laura said, shaking her head. “But if he deems those two as necessary for the future, we must follow his instructions.”

I figured she’d say that.

Laura was acting as a retainer should. Plus, Lione didn’t really think Ryoma’s decision was wrong. If he was going to expand his political influence, he needed as many skilled men on his side as he could get. He would need Signus and Robert to work for him in the future.

“Don’t look so worried. I ain’t gonna run or anything,” Lione said, giving Laura an ironic smile.

Still, she couldn’t make any promises under these conditions.

“Eh, we’ll manage, somehow. I’ll handle this!” Lione declared, combing her fingers through her flaming red hair.

“Yeah,” Laura said, finally regaining her smile. “I’ll take my position in the rear guard. Good luck.” She then bowed and returned to her post.

As Lione watched Laura leave, she went over her plan once again.

I don’t like making gambles on the battlefield, but...I guess I’ve got no choice.

Lione regarded Robert and Signus with the utmost caution. Her experience and abilities aside, she knew she was no match for either of them. For a young mercenary, Lione had claimed the lives of her fair share of enemy commanders. But even she was greatly opposed to fighting House Salzberg's Twin Blades. Their power was superhuman. They had been blessed from birth with great strength and had honed their skills since they were still boys. Those two were, without a doubt, very nearly the greatest warriors alive.

Not quite, though. But that's only because those two monsters aren't complete yet.

From what Lione had heard, Robert and Signus had only mastered up to the fifth chakra, the Vishuddha chakra located in the throat. With more experience, it wouldn't be long until they reached the seventh chakra located on the top of the head, the Sahasrara chakra.

Doing so would bring them to the threshold of human achievement, the ability to wield the most powerful martial thaumaturgy. When they coupled their polished skills with a reinforced body at its absolute limits, they would become what was known as ascendants. They could possibly reach beyond even that.

Transcendents. In this world, that word was akin to a fairytale monster. Ascendants were called such because they'd risen to the peak of human potential, but transcendents were those who had completely broken past the bounds. They were practically living gods...or perhaps living devils.

Of course, it wasn't yet certain that Signus and Robert would become transcendents. That was nothing more than a rumor or a joke that mercenaries told while sharing a drink. However, those two were menacing enough to turn that joke into a convincing possibility.

Facing people who were rumored to be capable of reaching such a level would be suicide. But even if they were on the border of becoming living gods, they weren't *real* gods. Ascendants and transcendents were still human beings. And any human could be killed. In fact, while legends spoke of their superhuman abilities, they often also depicted their tragic ends. Even men who matched a thousand soldiers had met their deaths.

Those were all myths and legends, so one couldn't rely on them as facts. And as far as Lione knew, there was no proof that any of the legendary heroes of this world ever existed. There was the chance that they'd lived quiet lives away from the public eye, but it was easier to assume that transcendents hadn't found a way to cheat death.

Even if they had reached the zenith of mankind, they were not immortal. And if so, Lione was confident she could find a way to kill them. Besides, Robert and Signus hadn't reached that level yet. They might someday, but at present they were still unascended humans,

which meant there was no shortage of ways to kill them. Stabbing, bludgeoning, poisoning, burning... She could drown them, or she could use Earth Sink to trap them and then bury them alive.

If Ryoma had merely ordered them not to lose, Lione would have come up with a way to take them out. But the fact she wasn't allowed to kill them made her task doubly difficult. The one silver lining was that Ryoma's first order was to "not lose."

Well, if Boltz can get that thing from Fort Tilt, we should be able to hang on until the boy returns. Besides, the information he sprinkled for 'em yesterday seems to have worked. They changed their main force to cavalry.

Lione smirked as she heard the galloping of hoofs in the distance.



Riding forward, Signus could see the enemy formation in front of him.

"Hey! Did you notice?!" Robert barked.

Signus nodded. "Yeah. Looks like the enemy's changed their approach since yesterday."

It had been hard to tell from afar, but now that they'd closed the distance, the change was evident. The soldiers were equipped with spears and large shields that hid their entire bodies. They stood huddled together in multiple rows. And though their armor looked roughly the same from a distance, there were a number of particular differences compared to what Signus remembered.

But the most suspicious detail was that the soldiers seemed to be moving in a way that greatly contrasted their aggressive movements from yesterday.

"Shields and spears... And they way they move..." Robert muttered. "Based on their armor, I'd say they're heavy infantry focused on defense."

"What do we do, Robert? Charge in?"

Their initial prediction was that the enemy would be using the same armor as yesterday. Most people wouldn't think different armor made that big of a difference, but Signus had seen enough people struck down after underestimating the smallest differences. He believed that falling back and reevaluating their options was a valid idea.

But while falling back would spare them from losing soldiers, returning to Epirus empty-handed would have its own consequences. If nothing else, the ten houses of the north, who had lent them these cavaliers, would criticize Signus and Robert for returning without fighting.

Besides, the fact that we don't know what they're doing is honestly pretty bad. We should probably launch at least one attack on them, even if

it'll cost us some troops.

In truth, the problem lay in how one approached this. Whether Signus chose to stick to caution or brave some risk, there was no way of knowing the outcome. That said, if Robert decided to charge forward, Signus would have no choice but to follow him as his partner.

Should they retreat and regroup, or should they strike to suss out the enemy's plan? Both were viable options, depending on the commander's outlook. If Robert were torn between those two choices, he'd sooner charge than retreat.

"I'll go in from the right. You go in from the left. All right?" Robert asked.

Signus nodded. As he'd expected, Robert had no intention of pulling back now.

"Let's go in, then!" Robert howled, turning his steed to the right.

"No, we don't know what they're planning!" Signus called out to him. "Let's launch a light strike first. If their lines crumble, we can extend the attack."

"Fine!"



Signus turned his horse to the left and rode ahead. His parting from Robert was like watching an arrow flying toward its target suddenly splitting in two.

Signus spurred his horse forward, riding with momentum toward the row of shields before him. He was a vanguard in the truest sense of the word. Normally, a commander wouldn't place himself at risk by fighting on the frontlines, but in Signus's case, this was the most efficient use of his strength.

So they're going to try to block me directly. Fine, then. Let's see what they can do.

Signus was already close enough to see the faces of every soldier in front of him.

"Ooooooh!"

Signus raised his voice in an animalistic battle cry. He swung the metal rod in his hands up and then brought it down with a howl on the enemy shields. A deafening metallic crash shook the battlefield. The soldier who'd been holding the shield flew backward, along with the soldier behind him.

Signus wasn't satisfied with this result, though.

This toughness, this weight!

When his iron rod clashed with the shield, the impact had shaken him all the way to the top of his head. He had been able to time it with the revolution of his chakras, conjuring enough strength to smash their guard. But he hadn't matched it with his horse's charge.

They had pushed Signus back. Their formation and composition was far stronger than the one they'd used yesterday.

But now I know!

Signus gave up on trying to break through and attempted to pull back in something similar to a U-turn. However, his intent wasn't to retreat, but to gain enough distance to charge forward again.

He looked quickly to his right, confirming that Robert had come to the same conclusion.



But this was what Lione, who commanded the opposing army, was hoping they would do.

"Their second strike's comin'! Have the injured soldiers fall to the rear guard and close the hole in our ranks! But this time form a diagonal line, not a horizontal one! Like a dragon opening its maw to swallow up prey!"

The soldiers swiftly followed her orders, tracing the motions they'd practiced countless times already.

Signus launched a second charge, approaching the soldiers.

Wait, they switched over to a diagonal formation?

Looking to the right, he saw that the line Robert was charging toward was moving the same way, except slanted in the opposite direction. Signus then realized they were being lured in.

Dammit, it's a trap!

Ryoma would have described this formation as a crane spreading its wings, rather than a dragon's maw like Lione had. But no matter the name, it didn't change the fact that Signus and Robert had been duped. As the Twin Blades charged in, the enemy soldiers began blocking off the road behind them.

Just like yesterday, they're gonna hit us from the flank! I knew Ryoma Mikoshiba was a sly man, so I was wondering why he was trying to clash with us head-on. But he even accounted for that?!

Since they had used a horizontal formation yesterday too, it had lulled Robert and Signus into thinking they were using the same one again today. Successfully reorganizing a formation in the middle of battle required a great deal of practice and skill, so they had dismissed how odd it was for them to employ the same one twice. But this was what the enemy was trying to pull.

The enemy lines split, as if to usher Signus in—to hold him in the embrace of death. Even though he'd already seen through their intentions, he couldn't do much to stop it now. His focus on mobility had become his downfall. He and his cavaliers had already gained too much speed in their charge.

Even if he tried to stop, his horse wouldn't be able to. If he tugged on the reins, his horse's legs wouldn't be able to stand the strain and could be injured. His horse would probably fling him off. And even if he did so despite all the risks, he'd be either pushed ahead or trampled by the horses behind him.

What was worse, the moment he ordered his horse to stop, he wouldn't be able to escape the battlefield anymore. While Signus's strength could get him out of this, the knights behind him would be galloping into hell's mouth. Whether he wanted to accelerate or stop, he'd need a bit of distance to do it.

If that's the case, I may as well just...

Given the impact he'd felt earlier, Signus wasn't all that willing to choose either option. But if he had to gamble either way, he needed to pick the one that would result in him returning alive with as many soldiers as possible. Robert seemed to have resolved to do the same because Signus saw him nodding in the distance.

Breaking through the enemy lines wasn't realistic, but at the same

time, turning back when they'd already accelerated so much wasn't feasible either. They did have one way out, though. They would have to stop their horses as much as possible as they plunged into the very throat of the dragon maw formation. They'd then skim along the deepest part of the enemy line to turn around and escape. Of course, the spot where their flanks connected was the most highly guarded part of the formation. Even if they were to break out from there, it would take them a long time to do so.

But the area directly behind them wasn't completely sealed off yet, and they could escape from there. Breaking through soldiers trying to box them in was much more likely to succeed than trying to defeat the ones standing primed and ready right in front of them. This way, the cavalry would be able to escape from the back without having to slow down their charge.

This'll be a huge gamble. My timing with Robert will be the most important thing.

If Signus were to charge in mindlessly, he'd run the risk of colliding with Robert's unit. To prevent that, either Robert or Signus would need to delay in order to shift their trajectory. In that case, it was clear which one of them drew the short straw, as unfair as it was. Both of them were equally matched, but only in individual strength.

Guess I'll have to be the one to do it.

Signus braced himself for the worst, but what he saw next defied his expectations.

They're...opening a way out?

As Signus charged at the wall of shields, they left a gap large enough for two or three horses to pass through. The moment Signus saw it, he decided to go through it.

Could it be a trap? Yes, certainly.

But at this rate, it's better than turning back.

The enemy force behind them was moving to close on them. Signus had a better chance at breaking through the enemies moving in from behind compared to the ones standing primed to intercept him. But if the enemies right in front of him left an opening, things were different. He could keep going and break through their lines, and some of his cavaliers would make it out. However, if they were to turn around, they'd have to slow down. This was still preferable to turning around right in front of the enemy soldiers, though.

Signus glanced at Robert, who immediately sped up. He'd probably sensed Signus's gaze and knew he would interpret his actions correctly.

So he's thinking the same thing. That settles it, then.

Signus raised his hand, ordering the cavaliers behind him to speed up. He then used the spike on his stirrup to spur his horse on. They

rode with the speed of the wind, the scenery sailing past them. He used his metal rod to sweep away the occasional spear as he charged ahead.

The faster they went, the denser the enemy formation became. It seemed like they were funneling them toward the gap. Signus and Robert closed the distance between them little by little.

“They pulled a fast one on us!” Robert barked at him.

He seemed quite livid he’d fallen for their scheme so easily. Robert wasn’t the only one who had been fooled, though. Signus felt the same way. But for now, they needed to use this anger and humiliation as a source of strength. That was their only way to break out of this predicament.

But Signus’s expectations were once again betrayed.

“We got out?”

They passed through the opening at the base of the crane wing formation. Signus had suspected it might be a trap, but apparently it wasn’t. He looked around. He saw the cavaliers follow him, and spotted Robert through the gap in the infantry wall.

But why? Were their soldiers uncoordinated?

That was possible. An army had to be very coordinated to successfully flank and annihilate an enemy force. Signus did admit that individually the Mikoshiba barony’s soldiers were very skilled, but that didn’t necessarily mean they had the experience needed to perform advanced unit tactics.

However, it seemed it was too soon to rejoice.

“No! They’re trying to close it up!” Robert yelled, his shout filling the battlefield.

After a hundred or so knights had followed Signus and Robert to safety, the shield soldiers closed the gap. Their objective was to split Signus and Robert from most of their knights.

It was then that Signus realized what they were up to, why they had separated and spared the vanguards from the rest of their army.

Oh, no. That’s what they were doing!

But it was too late. Moving in to save them now would only deepen the wound.

“We’ve got no choice. We have to retreat,” Robert whispered bitterly, suppressing his anger.

Another enemy unit was approaching them rapidly. If they were caught between the heavy infantry and these reinforcements, even Signus and Robert might not survive. They had no choice but to fall back at once. But that would mean leaving four hundred cavaliers behind the wall of heavy infantry, where they would almost certainly meet their doom. And who would be seen as responsible for their loss?

Goddammit. I’ll get back at you for this! Signus thought angrily as

he swung his metal rod down on a soldier in front of him. Even if all it did was relieve some of his rage, that was all he could do right now.



They retreated because they were afraid Laura's detachment would pursue them. I thought they might get pissed off and charge, but...

As Lione watched Robert's army retreat, she finally realized that they'd won. She had expected that Signus, the more collected of the two, would make that call. But while Robert wasn't known as being reckless, he did have a proclivity for sudden decisions that made him difficult to predict. Lione had thought that he might try to break through the blockade and storm their third formation, but thankfully he hadn't.

Of course, even if Robert had, they were prepared to stop him. But if he was choosing to retreat, that was fine by her. After all, if Robert and Signus were to decide to unite and go on a suicidal charge, Lione couldn't promise they wouldn't find a way out. Even though her prized infantry had surrounded them, the enemy might have been able to break through.

Well, either way, the gamble worked in our favor.

All that remained was to dispose of the poor cavaliers left behind. They couldn't break out, not now that Robert and Signus weren't there to lead them. Without their commanders, the cavaliers couldn't use their lauded mobility.

From the moment Robert, Signus, and their forces clashed with her heavy infantry's horizontal formation, Lione had realized that the enemy's storm-like charge and offensive force stemmed from the two commanders serving as vanguards. That was why, when they had the cavalry surrounded, she'd given them a chance to escape. By separating the commanders from their cavalry, she'd have the latter at her mercy.

And her plan had worked. It was a perfect victory.

They put too much stock in their own strength. I can't blame 'em, though, with how powerful they are.

Robert and Signus were fearsome commanders, an overwhelming force on the battlefield. The cavaliers they led were also strong and powerful. Together, they were a maelstrom of destruction. In order to counter this, Boltz had brought over heavy infantry from Fort Tilt.

Lione hadn't deluded herself into thinking she knew the full extent of the Twin Blades' power, and she'd known it would be a gamble to block their initial charge. Somehow, though, they had emerged from that gamble victorious.

Still, I wouldn't have thought our first battle was laying the groundwork for this one.

If Lione hadn't heard Ryoma's explanation, she'd have thought that all he did was employ his trained soldiers and their thaumaturgical gear, without resorting to any other tricks. But when she considered the enemy's position, his explanation made sense.

Yeah, a horizontal formation is simple. And since we stopped any information from leaking out of Wortenia, the enemy doesn't know how strong our army is. For all they're concerned, we're just upstarts who came out of nowhere.

A horizontal formation had its advantages. It minimized the surface area and number of soldiers exposed to the enemy, meaning fewer casualties. But it was one of many formations and the most basic. Soldiers just stood in a row, side by side. There were other factors, like how the soldiers thrust their shields or moved their legs, but it didn't take long to arrange and required little training.

Its simplicity had lulled Count Salzberg's army into thinking Ryoma's forces were made up of new recruits with minimal training. In truth, they had just interpreted the facts in the most optimistic and convenient way they could and patched the rest together with their own expectations and wishful thinking.

While Robert and Signus are as powerful as rumors say, the Igasaki clan's ninjas were right when they said there's plenty of ways to take advantage of them.

Lione knew about Robert and Signus's family issues. Signus in particular was backed against a wall and greatly anxious for his future. The battlefield was the only place they could exhibit their strength, the only place they were truly in their element. Because of this, they were overconfident in their strength. Their power was overwhelming, so they craved to use it and emerge victorious. And at the core of that was the desire to get back at their own families, who had insulted and humiliated them.

Well, there's another reason we won, Lione thought as she looked at the rows of heavy infantry surrounding the cavaliers. They had won because of *that*.

Weight-increasing thaumaturgy... I didn't think it'd be this useful.

When Lione first heard of it, she had been quite skeptical. It wasn't hard to understand how reducing weight could be useful. Lighter armor wouldn't weigh a soldier down. If a hardening seal was then applied, it was as effective as plate mail but felt like light leather armor. By contrast, a thaumaturgical seal that increased weight seemed like a disadvantage. Heavier armor would strain the wearer and slow them down.

However, there were indeed advantages to increasing weight. For example, it could help maintain equilibrium. If one were to bump or crash into another object, it was less likely to budge the heavier it

was. If two targets punched at each other with the same speed and momentum, the heavier one would have more impact. This was why weight was an advantage in sumo and other martial arts. In addition, when the weight was applied with endowed thaumaturgy, one had the freedom to activate and deactivate the seal at will. The armor's thick metal plates didn't change, but the endowed thaumaturgy could add extra weight.

If they need to use it, they can just circulate prana into the seal. And if they don't, they can cut off its supply. But applying it to everyone?

Thaumaturgy could make one as light as a feather, increasing mobility. But it could also make a shield even bulkier to block the enemy's charge. It wasn't without its problems, however. Fundamentally speaking, a piece of equipment could have only one endowed thaumaturgy seal. One could try to add another, but it made the seals themselves, otherwise known as thaumaturgical circuits, much more complex. It required a great deal of resources, and the one applying it had to be skilled. The price jumped as well. The heavy infantry's equipment cost three times as much as a normal soldier's. They'd bartered with Nelcius for them, so the cost might fluctuate when converted to coin, but it came up to about three times.

In addition, the weight-increasing seal was significantly less useful compared to the more generic weight-reducing seal. The weight-reducing seal made heavy equipment lighter and could be undone easily. After all, things had weight on their own. Soldiers usually wore chain mail under their leather armor, which resulted in a combined weight of forty kilograms. Considering this, there were hardly any situations where a weight-increasing seal would be helpful.

That wasn't to say weight-increasing seals had no usefulness at all, but they weren't very cost-effective. At most, they were a nice feature. A mercenary would almost always pick gear that lightened their load. However, such seals could heighten a defensive army's power. Robert and Signus's attacks might have knocked them back, but they were still able to block their direct blows.

In the end, it all depended on how one used it. Ryoma's forces would probably use these formations in the future, alongside their cavalry and ordinary soldiers, but those were all options they'd consider after this war.

"Well, this probably marks the end of today's battle."

Lione knew Count Salzberg couldn't get enough horses to reorganize this many cavaliers. The reason for that was simple: the more effort they put in, the greater the backlash when they failed. Not only would Robert and Signus be unable to deploy again quickly, the ten houses of the north would probably chew them out for their failure. That would cast a greater shadow on their hearts.

The ten houses view Count Salzberg as their alliance leader, but they're not his vassals. The boy really is good at reading the enemy. It's almost scary.

The sounds of battle from the heavy infantry's formation were dying down. They were taking out the enemy cavaliers.

"Well, that's a job well done. Time to regroup with Laura and return to camp," Lione whispered.

She looked up at the blue sky spanning above her, thinking of her young lord. He was currently leading a force of cavaliers from Fort Tilt to Viscount Bahenna's territory, one of the ten houses of the north.

Chapter 2: For a Better Tomorrow

Four days had passed since Lione and Laura's battle on the outskirts of Epirus, during which their army had remained locked in a stalemate with Epirus's forces. At the same time, Ryoma Mikoshiba had reached Viscount Bahenna's territory, southeast of Epirus.

It was past noon. The sun was beginning to dip into the west, but it was still casting its glow upon the earth. Based on its position, it was around four in the afternoon. Ryoma and his forces were currently camped out near a creek, taking their final break before the assault that evening. Given the distance they'd traveled, the horses were terribly fatigued.

Seated on a fairly large rock, Ryoma bit down on his portable rations. Viscount Bahenna's territory was on the eastern tip of northern Rhoadseria. The national border with Myest was just a little further east. This was where Ryoma's conquest of Epirus would truly begin.



“Just gotta wait for nightfall,” Ryoma whispered. His gaze was as cold as ice. He was prepared for what was about to come.

Sara, who sat at his side, was just as resolved.

Finally. It happens tonight.

Ryoma had gone to great lengths to prepare for this day. Tonight, they would raid one of the four villages in Viscount Bahenna’s domain. Besides the villages, there was also a large city that the viscount himself managed.

The village’s population was slightly over a hundred people. It was an ordinary hamlet off the highway and had no strategic value to speak of. It was also the smallest village in the viscount’s domain, so it had little importance in terms of tax yield and geopolitical influence.

Because of this, Viscount Bahenna had stationed only a small garrison of troops there. Based on the Igasaki clan’s preliminary investigation, there were ten or so soldiers, who couldn’t use thaumaturgy, and a single knight. This small garrison was better than nothing, but a force of this size was limited in what it could handle. If a large bandit group or a powerful monster were to attack, they’d be helpless to stop them. They might be able to stop weak monsters that even a neophyte adventurer could handle. As a military force, though, it was the smallest possible unit.

The reason the garrison was so small was because the viscount couldn’t defend every village in his domain to the same extent. Even if his army was for safeguarding the land, his budget wasn’t limitless. This was why the alliance of the ten houses of the north had been formed. That said, if he didn’t station at least one knight in every village and city, it would damage his position and authority as governor. This small force was Viscount Bahenna’s compromise between his duties and what he could actually manage.

Ryoma had five hundred cavaliers with him, so it was all the same whether the knight was in the village. Killing him would be the same as squishing an insect.

Ryoma’s victory was assured, but he wanted to avoid needless bloodshed. He needed to gain the ten houses of the north’s fortunes if he was to topple Epirus. This was part of his plan to defeat Count Salzberg, and the fewer casualties, the better.

Sara recalled their plan of attack, just as she had countless times since it was drafted. She continued to mull it over until they enacted it. She couldn’t afford to lose when her twin sister and Lione were fighting Count Salzberg’s forces on the frontlines. This battle would be the key to conquering Epirus.

We have to suppress this village as quickly as possible.

They had to minimize the casualties. She didn't assume that they could avoid all loss of life, but they needed to do everything they could to kill as few villagers as possible. To do that, their soldiers would have to go to each house and suppress the citizens—to nip their rebellious spirit in the bud. All of this would affect what came after the war and the country Ryoma would create.

For a better tomorrow...

The night before the war, in the Wortenia Peninsula, Ryoma had shared the ideal he believed in with Laura and Sara. The moment he said it, bashfully scratching his head, Sara had felt grateful that this young man was her chosen master.

"Now, let's take turns sleeping. We have a long night ahead of us," Ryoma said to her.

They were planning to spend the night attacking Viscount Bahenna's nearby village. Even with all their preparations, they would have to stay up the whole night.

They silently waited until night settled over the world...



Eight hours later, Ryoma stood in front of the villagers rounded up in the city square.

"We've gathered everyone here, just like you asked," the village headman said. He stepped up to face Ryoma, his expression strained with terror. The soldiers and the sole knight guarding the village followed him.

The soldiers and the knight were all solidly built. They were clearly well-trained, and they carried themselves well. However, they were all middle-aged. From a cursory glance, the youngest was approaching fifty, and the knight looked like he was pushing seventy.

He was probably reemployed as a police officer.

The term "seasoned veteran" had a pleasant ring to it, but a man this age had no business being on the front lines. Still, knights were the cornerstone of a village's public order, and they were also the governor's point of contact in that region. Even if he was useless in battle, he was still dispatched to act as the governor's representative, a glorified, trumped-up title.

The old knight glared at Ryoma. "We've accepted all your demands! What are you going to do next?!" His face was contorted in anger, but no amount of shouting would shift the situation in his favor.

"My apologies, but I need you all to evacuate this village," Ryoma said calmly. "However, you can take any and as much of your belongings as you can carry."

Ryoma's words and tone were polite, but his attitude left no room

for argument.

His orders made the villagers around him begin to murmur.

“What is he saying?”

“Evacuate the village?”

“Are we being driven out of our homes?”

A storm of questions filled the air, and the atmosphere gradually turned turbulent. But Ryoma didn't have the courtesy or the time to address their doubts.

“I'm sorry, but that's already been decided. Your compliance isn't a factor. You're free to resist, but we'll deal with you accordingly if you do.”

As if to stress his words, the cavaliers surrounding the villagers tensed and prepared themselves. Their threat was clear: resist, and your life is forfeit. The bloodlust in the air was enough to completely quash the villagers's defiance. They realized Ryoma was serious.

“I give you ten minutes to return to your homes and pack up anything you can. Once those ten minutes pass, we will set fire to the village.”

Once Ryoma finished explaining, he turned his back on the villagers, signaling that he wasn't open to negotiations.

“This is absurd. What is he?!” the village headman whispered. From his perspective, an army had suddenly come out of nowhere, waltzed into his village, and ordered them to evacuate and leave for the wilderness. It was incomprehensible.

None of the villagers budged. And this was exactly what Ryoma had been counting on. He needed them to make their way north before they calmed down and regained their bearings.

“I see you don't quite understand your position yet,” Ryoma said.

Sara, who stood at his side, handed him a bow and a burning arrow. He drew the string like a crescent moon and fired the arrow at a nearby house. The arrow zoomed through the air like a comet and hit the house's wooden roof. The moment it hit, the house caught fire. But though it was a wooden house, the flames didn't spread very quickly.

The Igasaki clan's work is as good as ever.

It was a cruel display, but Ryoma had to do it. If he merely sat by and did nothing, the villagers would regain their composure and start thinking rationally again. If they then decided to violently resist, it would be the worst-case scenario. This was why Ryoma had asked the Igasaki clan to prepare these fire arrows.

Crimson embers danced through the night air. For a moment, no one moved, but then one of the villagers ran to his house. As if he was the signal, the rest of the villagers did the same.

Before long, ten minutes had passed, and Ryoma ordered that the

village be torched.

Ryoma and his cavaliers led the villagers to the forest north of the village. A tinge of red was seeping into the evening sky, a glow from the fire they had set at the village. It was probably reaching its peak right about now.

“Why did this happen?” murmured the village headman as he thought of his burning home.

All around him, the villagers stood rooted in place, looking up at the sky. Watching them pained Ryoma’s heart.

I’ll never get used to this, huh?

He knew it sounded hypocritical, but Ryoma could say with confidence that his actions would benefit these villagers—not that any of them would accept his assurances. He had shattered their peace and ruined their daily lives. From their perspective, he was nothing short of a bandit. He had marched into their village with five hundred cavaliers, torn them from their daily meal, gathered them in the village square, and coerced them into leaving their homes. He hadn’t pillaged them, which did distinguish him from a bandit, but he couldn’t expect them not to feel displeased and disgruntled. If he were in their shoes, he never would have stood for this, and he wouldn’t have forgiven the brute who’d launched such a terrible raid.

Ryoma could feel their hateful glares. If given the chance, some of the villagers would surely charge him and his men. The only reasons they didn’t were the cavaliers surrounding them and the women and children among them. They didn’t want to get them mixed up in the heat of battle.

Feeling the fearful but belligerent scowls of the villagers, Ryoma let out a small sigh. In modern Japan, one didn’t often feel hundreds of pairs of eyes staring at them with such hatred. Ryoma knew his actions were by no means commendable. The discomfort of the situation left him restless.

Still, I had to do this.

The villagers’ expressions were filled with terror. Children buried their faces in their mothers’ skirts as they wept. They wanted to scream and cry out, but they understood, in their own way, the danger it would bring.

Everyone was terrified. If Ryoma could have avoided it, he never would have put them through this. But he wouldn’t budge. He’d already decided to burn every village in the ten houses of the north’s domains. Whether his actions were good or bad, he had to do this. He couldn’t hesitate.

Ryoma had no intention of enacting needless violence, nor was he simply harassing the ten houses of the north. This was solely to topple

the citadel city of Epirus and to secure the future he desired after the war.

Especially for the future...

Heavy taxation, unreasonable labor—these villagers spent their days scrambling for their livelihood. Why were they so poor? The answer to that was simple: they didn't actually possess any land. The governors owned the lands they lived on. The villagers were just leasing it.

For example, the land this village lived on wasn't inhospitable. It was surrounded by nature and greenery. Thanks to a nearby brook, it also had an abundance of water. An agricultural community could very easily live here self-sufficiently. But it wouldn't be *their* land.

This village had originally been situated near a highway, but several years ago, the highways were restructured in order to bypass the nearby woods. This change had been devastating for the village, and its prosperity had declined ever since. The only people who visited were the tax magistrate, who came once a year, and adventurers collecting plants from the forest. Not even peddlers would visit. The village didn't do much trade, and they didn't have any special merchandise to sell.

Maybe if they had something to attract tourists, like a hot spring, things would be different. But the brook is about the only thing here.

If asked how to grow this village, even Ryoma would be stumped. The best option would be to migrate to a more developed city. But the village had no such prospects, and the villagers had nowhere else to live. They would have to spend the rest of their lives in this village.

There were many reasons they couldn't relocate, but the biggest one was that they didn't have the freedom to migrate. The circumstances were similar to those in Japan's Edo period. Commoners weren't accepted in any land except for the one they were born in. They were free to move into different homes within their cities or villages, but otherwise their movement was greatly restricted.

Strictly speaking, moving to another more affluent noble's land wasn't an option. In the case of a marriage or an inheritance, they would need to notify their governor, state their reason, and pay a considerable fine. Then they'd have to do the same in the land they were moving to. If they didn't take these steps, their names would remain in the former noble's family register, and they wouldn't be registered in the new one's.

Some commoners fled their governor's tyranny, but they were treated as refugees—people unregistered in the census. In modern Japan, there were cases where a child hadn't been registered because the parents hadn't gone through the legal process for personal reasons. That child could still receive aid from nonprofit organizations, though,

and public offices would still be willing to process them. People might gossip about the responsibility of not being in the family register, but public institutions wouldn't cast them aside for it.

That's not the case in this world, though.

A world with no concept of public welfare or human rights wasn't hospitable to refugees. They were treated like non-existent ghosts. The only way a refugee could resolve this was to return to their homeland and go through the official procedure—even if a tyrannical governor ruled that land.

Some governors did care enough to protect refugees. But if a noble were to just accept commoners who'd drifted in from another territory, it could spark conflict with the other governors. Only a powerful noble could take in refugees and overrule the governor they'd fled from. That could still cause backlash from surrounding nobles, though. Even if a noble managed his people poorly, he still saw them as his rightful property. All nobles knew this, so they didn't often take risks for mere commoners.

That left just one relatively safe path: prostitution. However, people in the underworld almost always ran those businesses. If one didn't go through them to find work, they could easily get killed for encroaching on someone's business. Besides, getting approval to work in someone else's turf was honestly a matter of luck. And even if one did happen to get approved, the sly crooks of the underworld knew refugees had little options and would certainly take advantage of them. They would even sell them off to slavery if a chance presented itself.

Refugees could also become mercenaries or adventurers. The guild only needed their personal information, so it was easy to register with them. The staff would fill in the forms if they couldn't write. But despite this, very few people could truly seek employment as mercenaries or adventurers.

Amateurs who've never held a sword in their lives can't just become mercenaries in the blink of an eye.

Ryoma was a special case, but people who could make the transition from a peaceful life to those professions were incredibly rare. In other words, becoming a refugee was a difficult path.

As for this village, they couldn't just move elsewhere and start a new village. Viscount Bahenna wouldn't consent because his domain wasn't large enough. His territory was average-sized, but the land actually fit for living was limited, and most of it was already settled. An entire village couldn't move into one of those settlements either. It was bound to create friction with the existing residents.

Assuming they were lucky enough to somehow find land suitable for migration, no sane governor would permit it. Relocating would

mean they'd be exempt from taxes until they'd built the same livelihood they had before. That would take a bite out of the governor's personal income.

The sad truth was that the majority of nobles on this Earth weren't interested in increasing the living standards of their subjects. The nobles were like an industry that made money off of managing a country's land. Their objective was always to make profit; nothing else mattered to them.

However, only the most foolish of nobles would leave their commoners to suffer in the event of a natural disaster or a war. And any commoners living under such a noble would migrate without a second thought, no matter the risks involved. But unless said disaster or war impacted a village's productivity, the governor would never approve a migration. It was similar to how a capitalist society pursued profit above all else. A governor would only tolerate a tax decrease if they ended up profiting from it in the long run, like building a new city to help secure a trade network.

Put that way, I can understand how some nobles resort to tyranny...

Ryoma had no desire to torment his subjects. In fact, by his standards, this was the sort of vile behavior that ought to be abolished. But if one were to look at it from a purely economical perspective, it was hard to say it was completely without merit.

Tyrannical governors didn't act the way they did out of a sadistic desire to harass their subjects. Their actions weren't a result of dubious morality, but a desire to make the most out of their land. They extorted their people for all they had, and once they had more people, they squeezed them for all they were worth too. In a way, they were the ultimate ecologists for using up all the human resources they had. This offered no comfort to the people they exploited, though.

"What are we to do now?" the village headman cried, still on his knees.

The old knight, who was seated next to him, patted him sympathetically on the shoulder.

What do we do now, indeed.

Ryoma approached the headman. He kneeled down and whispered into the old man's ears, telling him the way they were to go.

At the time, Ryoma didn't know that a shadow was approaching, traveling from the south, swift as the wind.





Vector Chronicle spurred his horse forward as the moonlight and his lantern illuminated the dark road ahead. He rode hard, ignoring his aching body. After he had contracted Carrion disease, he'd never withstood such strain. His breathing was uneven, and he could feel his heart beating painfully in his chest. With each intake of breath, pain rushed through his body. Despite this, his elation pushed him to keep moving. His body was thick with both the scent of sweat and the fragrance of perfume, meant to mask the stench of his flesh as it rotted alive.

Following close behind Vector was the lieutenant who had served him since he was forced to take over as baron after his brother died. The knights of the Chronicle barony rode behind them.

"Lord Vector, I understand your impatience, but we really should take a break!" the lieutenant shouted at Vector's back.

The lieutenant's face was contorted with pain and exhaustion. It was quite unusual to see such a seasoned knight in this kind of state, but they had been riding for three days straight since they'd left the Chronicle barony. Vector had dismounted a total of eight times, but only when they stopped at roadside towns to exchange their horses.

Other than that, they'd galloped day and night, not even stopping to eat—chewing on combat rations while they rode. The only thing they had resembling a break was when the Lieutenant had ordered they slow to give the steeds a rest. Even then, Vector had strictly forbidden them from stopping altogether.

Few people would continue on such a demanding march. When Vector departed from his domain, a hundred knights had followed him. Now those numbers had dwindled to twenty. The infantry had abandoned the march on the first day. Since they had to run on their own, it was expected that they couldn't keep up. Their stamina simply couldn't last the journey. Most were simple grunts anyway, incapable of using martial thaumaturgy.

While the cavaliers did fare better than the infantry, they were also approaching the end of their ropes. Half of them had already turned around and left. Riding a horse wasn't just straddling a saddle. The faster a horse went, the harder it shook its rider. Though stirrups helped, it took quite a bit of stamina to remain balanced on a horse and not fall off.

By modern standards, when a force had lost over half its soldiers, it was already considered routed. It was reckless, to say the least, to ride nonstop and deplete one's soldiers. Even the knights who still followed Vector were nearly at or past their limits. Most wanted

nothing more than to fall to the ground and finally get some rest.

The sole exception was Vector himself. His lieutenant's suggestion was nothing but bothersome buzzing to his ears. From the moment he read Mikhail's letter, Vector was prepared to throw his life away in the name of this mission.

"Forget me. If you can't keep going, turn back and join me later!" Vector shouted back.

He'd already had this exchange countless times during the last few days. But his deputy and retainer couldn't just accept his lord's words and leave him. He couldn't let a baron travel on his own, though they were taking a paved highway.

However, something happened that forced them to stop.

"The sky is...red?" Vector whispered, tightening his grip on the reins.

The sky above the forest to their right was a bright crimson, a sign that a fire was raging in that direction.

"Did a forest fire break out?" the lieutenant asked.

Vector narrowed his eyes pensively. A forest fire could easily be the cause, but...

The weather's been fair the last few days, and it hasn't been particularly dry either.

Lightning was the main cause of forest fires, but there were other causes, like a dry spell.

"I believe this area is within Viscount Bahenna's domain?" Vector asked, suspicion brewing in his heart.

His lieutenant took out a map from his bag and inspected it. "Yes, it is," he confirmed.

"Something feels wrong..." Vector murmured, turning his eyes to the east.

His lieutenant nodded. He likely felt the same way.



Ryoma watched from behind as the villagers made their way north. They crossed the woods with all the belongings they could carry and made their way to Epirus.

I just hope they get there safely.

Ryoma knew the highways were relatively safe, but nothing was ever certain in this world. They could run into bandits or encounter monsters. The only thing he could do right now was pray that didn't happen.

It was then that Ryoma heard a voice behind him.

"Milord, I come bearing a report."

An Igasaki ninja he'd sent to scout the area appeared. His features were hidden behind a mask, but he had the voice of a middle-aged

man.

“What is it?” Ryoma asked.

“There’s a group advancing this way from the south,” the ninja replied.

Ryoma’s expression darkened. Whoever this group was, they couldn’t have shown up at a worse time.

“How many are there?”

“Twenty, maybe less. All are on horseback.”

“Cavaliers...”

They’re probably travelers who noticed the forest burning. Or maybe they’re bandits looking for someone to rob.

There was a chance Viscount Bahenna’s vassals had caught wind of Ryoma’s raid and were pursuing. But if they knew someone had raided one of the villages, they wouldn’t send a mere twenty troops to handle the situation. If they had slipped past the Igasaki clan’s counterintelligence measures and leaked information about Ryoma’s raid, they’d also know that Ryoma had five hundred cavaliers with him.

Either way, we’ll need to intercept them.

Whoever these people were, Ryoma’s task remained the same. Nonetheless, he couldn’t let anyone know what had happened here—at least not yet.

“Sara, leave about fifty troops here and take the rest into the woods. If it’s an advance force, cut off their escape route.”

Sara nodded. She quickly divided the cavaliers and led a force into the woods.

Before long, the enemy cavaliers emerged from the trees. A floral aroma wafted up from somewhere.

It’s a traveling noble. But this smell...

The man riding at the head of the group was clearly dressed like a noble. Considering the armor and weapons his riders carried, Ryoma assumed his guess was accurate and this was a noble’s retinue. He didn’t recognize their banner, though.

Before Ryoma declared war on Count Salzberg, he had memorized the crests of the ten houses of the north, so he knew for sure it wasn’t one of them.

So, is this a coincidence...or not?

If this was a coincidence, the other force was just unlucky enough to run into Ryoma. But if this was deliberate, it could become a problem.

“Good evening,” Ryoma greeted in a friendly tone. “I’m Ryoma Mikoshiba, head of the Mikoshiba barony. Who might you be?”

For now, he needed to confirm who they were. But as soon as Ryoma said his name, the man’s glare filled with bloodlust.

“Mikoshiba? You’re Ryoma Mikoshiba?!” he asked, shouting with the obsessed hatred of a vengeful ghost.

At the sound of his howl, the knights behind him drew their swords.

“Lord Vector!” one knight called. He seemed to be the noble’s aide and lieutenant.

Well, shit. Just saying my name made everything go south.

Multiple sets of eyes glinted in his direction, burning with hostility. Normally, no one would regard their fellow man with this much antagonism unless they had a good reason.

Ryoma carefully observed the noble’s face.

I’m pretty sure I’m not going senile, so... I don’t think I’ve ever met this guy before.

He assumed that if he’d done something to earn this much ire from someone, he’d at least recognize them.

“Yes, I’m Ryoma Mikoshiba,” Ryoma said in an innocuous tone. “Who might you be?”

Ryoma remained as calm and reasonable as he could. He couldn’t cut the man down just for glaring at him, no matter how hateful his glare was.

Ryoma’s level-headed response seemed to fan Vector’s burning anger. He almost looked offended by it. He didn’t answer Ryoma’s question, instead pointing his blade at him. It was clear he’d attack without warning if the chance arose.

“I understand your plan! This fire... You burned the village, didn’t you?!”

“Wow. That’s a pretty rude thing to say to someone you just met. What are you basing your accusations on?” Ryoma asked, turning his eyes to the knight standing next to Vector. “I only came here because I saw the forest fire, and you’re just going to assume I burned a village based on nothing?”

Ryoma shrugged, as if to say he was offended by the accusation. Of course, the man’s suspicion was correct, but if Ryoma were to admit that, Vector’s men would definitely attack. Besides, Ryoma wouldn’t earn any information that way.

For now, I need to ask why he hates me so much.

In truth, Ryoma could think of countless reasons someone would hate him. He’d done plenty of detestable things to survive. When he was first summoned, he had tortured the O’ltoimea Empire’s court thaumaturgist, Gaius Valkland, for information. He’d instructed the Igasaki clan to assassinate Wallace Heinkel and his family for getting him involved in the Rhoadserian civil war. He’d taken hundreds of lives with his own hands, and his plots and machinations had likely claimed the lives of over ten thousand people.

Someone could easily blame Ryoma and call him a mass murderer, even though circumstances had pushed him into that position. However, the cruel reality was that there were people in this world who were man-eating monsters that dwarfed Ryoma. Ryoma had to become a demon in his own right in order to survive, so he didn't regret anything he had done. That was exactly why he wanted to know why this man hated him so much. He felt obligated to dignify the lives he'd take by remembering them and etching them into his heart.

Perhaps that emotion somehow got through to the enemy, because the man's expression changed. Or maybe he was just eager to announce their grudge.

"Very well. Then I'll introduce myself," Vector said. He relaxed his stance and lowered his sword, but he didn't sheathe it—a signal that he was still on guard. "My name is Baron Vector Chronicle. As representative of Queen Lupis Rhoadserians of Rhoadseria, I have come to stop the war between the Mikoshiba barony and the Salzberg countdom!"

"Huh?" Ryoma exclaimed in disbelief.

He wasn't surprised at Vector's unfamiliar name. Blood relations between nobles were complicated and convoluted. It wasn't uncommon for cousins and even siblings to marry. Though Ryoma wasn't familiar with the Chronicle barony, that didn't mean he couldn't have done something to incur their wrath.

Ryoma wasn't surprised he was Queen Lupis's representative either. He'd considered that something like this might happen. But the part he couldn't fathom was why a messenger who claimed to have come to stop the war would draw their sword on him. Vector's announcement was illogical. His actions clearly contradicted his words. It was like someone saying they wanted pasta, only to go to a pizza restaurant.

If he came here to stop the war, why is he trying to attack me?

That doubt swirled in Ryoma's mind. A messenger attempting to establish an armistice wouldn't be this aggressive toward him.

Something about this guy feels off...

Ryoma's instincts told him that Vector was particularly dangerous.

"So Her Majesty sent you to stop the war? You mean, you're here to arbitrate a cease-fire?" Ryoma asked, his tone growing suspicious.

"That's right!" Vector said proudly, seemingly not noticing Ryoma's dubious eyes.

It seemed Vector strongly believed he was doing the right thing. But the more brazen he became, the less Ryoma was inclined to believe him.

"Then I must apologize, but could you show me a letter or

message signed with Her Majesty's seal?"

Ryoma's demand was perfectly reasonable. When a sovereign sent a messenger to one of their vassals, an accompanying letter was an accepted technicality. But Vector's expression twisted in anger. In polite terms, he was a frank man. In reality, he was short-tempered. This was enough for Ryoma to understand why Vector Chronicle had come here. After all, this kind of impulsive frankness had already manipulated and troubled Ryoma plenty of times in the past.

Oh, I see...

Vector's features were pallid and pale. Seeing that he was gasping for air, Ryoma quickly realized he was ill. The scent of perfume rising from his body felt too thick, almost sickening. But behind that fragrance, Ryoma could faintly smell decaying flesh.

"Baron Vector Chronicle, yes? Based on your expression, I'm assuming you don't have a letter. So, whose orders are you following?" Ryoma asked, snorting in scorn.

It's not a bad plan, but they picked the worst actor possible. This couldn't even count as third-rate theater. It's just a farce.

Without a letter, it didn't matter if Vector really was a messenger from the queen. More troubling was that whoever had sent Vector knew their messenger could be killed, yet they had no qualms about sending him to die.

Even supposing Vector did have a letter, they were in the middle of a forest, without a third party to testify. It was the perfect situation for Ryoma to kill him and hide the corpse. No one would ever discover what had happened to him. Vector was so sure that he was in the right that he'd become foolhardy.

"It must have been Meltina or Mikhail, right?" Ryoma asked.

"W-Well..." Vector stammered. It was painfully clear who had sent him.

"Well, since you came all the way here, the least I can do is rise to the challenge and duel you," Ryoma said, drawing Kikoku and holding it up in a lower-level posture. "I think that suits you better than playing the jester, doesn't it?"

At that moment, a demonic howl sounded through the velvety darkness of night. But Vector was too driven and focused to hear either it or Ryoma's question.

Vector held up his sword at eye-level. When he did, Ryoma realized he'd miscalculated. The way Vector handled his blade was as intense as a storm. He was fully prepared to die, and for a moment it overwhelmed Ryoma.

This pressure... He's... I guess he's not just a bold fool.

Ryoma had indeed underestimated his opponent. Vector had shown himself to be thoughtless, almost embarrassingly so. If his

intent was to fool Ryoma, he should have done a better job. However, the way Vector held his sword proved he was genuinely skilled. His technique wasn't something one could master easily. It was the product of both decades of devoted training and natural talent.

All the muscles in Vector's body were fully relaxed, like a bow string waiting to be released. The pressure he exhibited contrasted with that and alerted Ryoma to his strength. He was a match for, if not stronger than, Greg Moore, whom Ryoma had dueled in the battle for the Notis Plains.

Well, shit. I put my foot in my mouth, didn't I?

Ryoma cursed his miscalculation. He hadn't expected him to be this skilled. But the chance for a surprise attack had already passed. If Ryoma were to signal his soldiers to move in now, Vector would sever his head before they could do anything. He wouldn't be able to keep Vector in check using the weapons hidden on his body either. Tricks wouldn't work at this point.

Everyone held their breaths in suspense.

Things aren't looking good here...

Ryoma raised his blade and took an overhead stance. To avoid being overwhelmed, he'd assumed a stance that discarded defense and instead focused on a direct, one-on-one duel.

In response, Vector let out a howling battle cry, using all the prana remaining in his body to reinforce himself.

Ryoma and Vector stood thirty feet apart, but little by little they closed the gap. Suddenly, Ryoma let out an animalistic roar, swinging Kikoku down in a diagonal slash. It was a simple, powerful blow, without any tricks or tactics behind it.

Vector met his attack by remaining completely still. His stance didn't break one bit. His entire body was screaming in pain already, but that kept his heart calm and collected. The next moment, Vector thrust the tip of his blade toward Ryoma's throat, focusing all his force into that single motion.

It was a powerful attack, executed with ungodly speed. Had his friend Mikhail seen it, he would have praised it as the single most impressive attack Vector had ever accomplished.

However, Ryoma had predicted that move. He tilted his head slightly and avoided the blade.

He really did go for the throat.

Based on the positioning of Vector's limbs, Ryoma got a rough idea of how Vector would attack. Ryoma was skilled enough to make that kind of educated guess, but Vector's attack had somewhat exceeded Ryoma's expectations.

Heat burned throughout Ryoma's body, like a soldering iron against his skin. It was a heat Ryoma had been familiar with since

infancy. Ignoring it, he swung Kikoku down at Vector's right shoulder, believing in the swordsmanship he had devoted his life to.



Vector Chronicle felt something gushing out of his body. He could see it spraying on the ground. It didn't feel unpleasant, however. The pain that had tormented him ever since he'd contracted Carrion disease was fading away.

I'm dying...

Vector Chronicle was indeed withering away. He was like a candle on the verge of flickering out. This one final moment was perhaps the climax of his life.

I'd hoped I'd have a chance to strike him down...but I didn't make it.

Ever since Vector had read Mikhail's letter, he had harbored this desire within his heart. He'd heard rumors of Ryoma Mikoshiba's crafty, cruel nature before. Even though it was just hearsay, Vector didn't expect a straightforward, pigheaded man like himself could fool a strategist like Ryoma. Even if he had managed to do that, he didn't think the conclusion Mikhail and Meltina wished for would come to pass.

And if that's the case...

Basically, Vector had forced Ryoma Mikoshiba into shooting the messenger. He wasn't suicidal, but Ryoma had slain Kael Iruna, a man equal to himself and Mikhail. Vector wasn't so overconfident that he expected to beat such a skilled man, at least not with his body crippled by disease.

He'd told Mikhail and Meltina that he would gladly assume the role of messenger, and he'd honestly meant it. If he must die, let his death be of use to someone.

"Lord Mikoshiba..." Vector uttered. "One day, let us once again..."

Those were the final words of a knight who'd laid down his life for the Kingdom of Rhoadseria. Ryoma, feeling a warm liquid splash on his cheek, remained still, listening to his final soliloquy.

Chapter 3: Swarm of Locusts

After Ryoma Mikoshiba had declared war, the results of the battles outside of Epirus had exceeded the expectations of many. At first, everyone had believed that the ten houses of the north would defeat Ryoma's army, but no one expected them to lose with nothing to show for it. It wasn't just the Rhoadserian nobles, with their sense of privilege, who'd thought that either. The surrounding countries, such as Myest, had also believed they would crush Ryoma's army without much resistance.

There were several reasons everyone had thought this, but the main reason was the characteristics of Ryoma's domain. Ryoma governed the Wortenia Peninsula, an unpopulated land, and he hadn't governed it for very long. However, they were well aware of the economical value Wortenia held. The trade pact with Queen Grindiana Helnescharles of Helnesgoula and the three kingdoms of the east had skyrocketed the land's financial significance. Unfortunately, everyone placed more significance on tax revenue as the primary source of income. Because of that, very few people realized the true value of the peninsula.

On top of that, Ryoma Mikoshiba wasn't even a citizen of Rhoadseria. He was also a commoner. His background was problematic. Helena Steiner was a commoner who'd risen to the rank of general. The precedent she'd set meant that even Ryoma, a mere commoner, could become a governor. But his status as both a foreigner and a commoner made his promotion that much more controversial.

Ryoma had liberated slaves as a means of overcoming his limitations, but everyone had seen that as a hasty stopgap measure. They hadn't believed that Ryoma could beat Count Salzberg. But despite the negative speculation of everyone around him, ten days had passed since the fighting began outside Epirus, and the two sides were still locked in a stalemate.

In the heart of Epirus was Count Salzberg's estate. In one of its rooms, an angry shout shook the air.

"Every last one of those idiots, saying whatever they pleased!" Robert howled, his face red as he thought back to the meeting he'd just attended. Young fools with hardly any combat experience and

cowards who bought their military exploits with coin had spent the whole meeting brutally criticizing the war's progress.

Unlike the other nobles, Robert and Signus weren't the heads of their families, nor would they inherit that title. Because of this, the other nobles had heavily criticized them. That much was to be expected. Even their own blood relatives treated them that way. But the constant stream of heartless, disparaging insults had stirred up Robert's anger and annoyance. They had mocked him many times for his status as a second son who'd never inherit the headship of his house.

Signus had also been forced to tolerate countless remarks about whether he even had Baron Galveria's blood running through his veins. In truth, he was just as annoyed as Robert was, if not more. His anger was inching into bloodlust. But even though most of their insults were groundless accusations, some of the things they'd said couldn't be written off as baseless slander.

It pisses me off to admit it, but they did get the best of us on the first two days.

Since they'd adopted a wait-and-see approach on the first day to gauge the enemy's strength, Cidney O'Donnell, whom Robert's father had sent to watch Robert, had perished in the fighting. After that, Robert and Signus had attacked the enemy lines, but their accomplishments in that battle were negligible.

Thanks to that, many were of the opinion that this battle had ended in a loss for the ten houses. There were also suspicions that Robert had been involved with Cidney's death, since he was known to dislike him. Of course, Robert hadn't had any hand in it, but it certainly seemed a possibility.

Both Robert and Signus wished people wouldn't count Cidney's demise as a factor in their defeat. But they had to keep that desire to themselves. Even with Count Salzberg backing them, Baron Bertrand wouldn't sit idly by if he found out Robert had intentionally left his vassal to die. And Signus would be criticized for allowing him to do it.

On the second day of fighting, Lione's ploy with her heavy infantry had resulted in the loss of the ten houses' large force of cavaliers. That battle was definitely a loss for them, and Robert had to accept any criticism levied at him for that defeat. But that didn't mean he wasn't annoyed by the members of the ten houses running their mouths.

Still, we need to shut them up somehow, and soon.

Count Salzberg's estate was functioning as a lodge for the heads of the ten houses and their heirs. It was a large estate, and Count Salzberg's wife, Lady Yulia, had allotted the rooms so as to avoid any conflict. Still, someone could be listening in, so Robert couldn't talk

for fear of being overheard.

“Hey, calm down already. Shouting won’t make this better,” Signus said as he reached for a glass sitting on the table. “Here, this is some of the count’s finest wine. Costs ten gold a bottle, and it tastes like it too. Just sit down and enjoy it for now.”

Signus tilted the glass casually toward Robert and then took a sniff. He really was intent on enjoying this fine wine. The strong aroma filled his nostrils, and he took a small sip. It had a rich, moderate sourness to it, and a natural bitterness that spread over the tongue in a perfect balance.

At that moment, Signus felt truly pleased and satisfied. A low-ranking noble, and a sixth son at that, would normally never get to experience a flavor like this. But Robert lashed out at him in anger.

“Why the hell are you just sitting there and relaxing?! At this rate, you’ll be in trouble too! And it’s all because those brainless idiots won’t keep their mouths shut!”

Robert growled at Signus like an animal and slammed his large fist on the table. He stood over two meters tall, and his body had been tempered by countless battles. Even this table, built from firm evergreen oak, snapped under the force of his fist. The glass and ceramic plates fell to the floor and shattered with ear-splitting screeches. A red stain spread over the carpet, and the rich scent of wine filled the room.

Robert’s shoulders rose and fell with each breath, and he stared at Signus with bloodshot eyes. But Signus simply shook his head.

“I swear. Why do you always have to do the most pointless things? People like us don’t really get the chance to enjoy this kind of wine. You just wasted a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity,” Signus said regretfully as he brought the glass in his hands to his lips.

It seemed what mattered most to Signus at the moment was enjoying the wine. A bit surprised—if not exasperated—by Signus’s attitude, Robert quieted his heart. He took a deep breath and then exhaled.

“Just looking at your indifferent mug makes me feel dumb for getting this mad,” he said.

“All the side dishes are gone now, but we still have this wine from the count. You gonna try it?”

Signus approached a nearby shelf and took out a bottle of sealed wine, pouring a glass for Robert.

“Yeah, I’ll take it,” Robert relented, accepting the glass and smelling its fragrance. “It smells good, yeah.”

This seemed to calm Robert down somewhat. It was said that a good meal was all it took to put a man in a good mood, and it seemed this counted for fine wine too.

“You calmed down now?” Signus asked.

“Yeah. Sorry,” Robert replied, averting his gaze awkwardly. He knew his behavior was shameful.

“Besides, we’re in the count’s estate,” Signus added, glaring at Robert. “Even if we do have our men keeping people away from us, that was careless of you.” Indeed, the things Robert had said were very dangerous. “But I’ll admit that if you hadn’t started shouting at those idiots, I’d have stuck my sword down their throat.”

Signus’s sudden, uncharacteristic remark rendered Robert speechless. “You’d have...what?” he eventually croaked out, cracking an amused smile.

Signus laughed merrily. “I mean, wouldn’t I? Anything that pissed you off would make me angry too, right? But if we both lash out at them, we’ll lose this war altogether. Even the count’s having trouble holding back the enemy while also managing them.”

Everyone saw Signus as the more reasonable of the Twin Blades, the one who held the reins on Robert’s unruly nature. But in truth, he was just as belligerent and battle-crazed as his partner. He had to be. If he weren’t, he wouldn’t have taken the role of a vanguard who charged the enemy while doubling as a commander. He wasn’t the type to talk things over; he was more likely to go for the kill.

There was only one reason Signus hadn’t resorted to force then. Killing the heads of the ten houses or their heirs would have, without question, resulted in both of their executions. Signus had no intention of exchanging his own precious life for the worthless lives of those swine.

“They piss me off, but we need their soldiers to win this war. You can understand that, right, Robert?”

“Yeah. Just from the last few days, it’s clear Mikoshiba’s army has the edge in gear and the quality of their soldiers. I wouldn’t have believed it if I hadn’t seen it myself, but...”

“Yeah, same here.” Signus sighed, a tired smile on his lips. “I don’t know what he did to make his soldiers that strong. Wish I could ask him, actually.”

The enemy had exceptional fighting spirit and high-quality gear. Not only were they disciplined when fighting as a group, but each individual soldier was considerably skilled. They’d met Robert and Signus’s charge head-on without breaking their lines, and they’d even managed to counterattack. The enemy army was both spirited and organized—a real, tangible threat.

“Are numbers really all we have on our side?” Robert asked.

Signus smiled sardonically. He couldn’t be certain, but he replied, “I think so. I’d say they’ve got a six to four advantage over us. Still, they lost a number of troops during our battles, and they hardly have

a thousand troops left today. We still have two thousand. If we just stay in Epirus and hold a siege battle, we shouldn't lose. Sitting tight and coming up with a plan might be a good option. At worst..."

"We could ask for reinforcements," Robert finished.

The ten houses had left several dozen knights to govern their domains in their absence. If things got bad enough, they could pull those knights away from their duty to serve as temporary reinforcements. Or they could conscript their commoners as a last resort. They could also hire mercenaries. Their quality and proficiency weren't great, but relying on quantity was a viable strategy.

"But with internal affairs as unstable as they are, who knows what might happen if the ten houses leave their domains unmanaged," Signus added.

They might win this war, but if their commoners rose up in revolt, all of their efforts would have been for nothing. Not to mention, Rhoadseria's current state made the bandits more rampant and daring, and with no one to hold them at bay, they could inflict serious damages. Focusing on governing one's domain rather than going to war would be the correct course of action at a time like this.

Still, they can't pull back now. Though I guess if Mikoshiba wanted to end this quickly, we could bargain with him.

Each of the ten houses had entered this war because of their interest in the Wortenia Peninsula. A truce now would leave a large hole in the houses' pockets, and it would also incur Count Salzberg's wrath. No matter how this war ended, they would need to make some kind of compromise with the Mikoshiba barony.

"Well, either way, we won't lose so long as we have Epirus," Robert stated. "The count knows that; that's why he didn't say anything during that meeting. And he basically let the nobles use us as punching bags!"

Robert gulped down the wine in his glass. Even now, they placed their trust in Epirus's tall walls and deep moats.

At least they had, until the moment they heard someone urgently knocking on their door.



Ten minutes before Signus and Robert heard the knock on their door, a sentry on late-night guard duty noticed a disturbance from his station in the watchtower.

"Hey, is it just me, or can you see something strange out there?"

Perhaps his intuition cultivated by his long years as a soldier had alerted him to it. Or maybe it was a more basic, animalistic instinct. Whichever it was, the man's suspicion was justified. The other soldiers on duty looked out from over the walls and began murmuring.

“The enemy went around to march in from the south. Cheeky bastards. I guess that upstart noble has to be good at petty tricks, eh?” one of the soldiers said jokingly.

A few of the others hummed in agreement, but one cautious soldier shook his head.

“Yeah, but there’s something in the air today. I’m getting a bad feeling here...”

He squinted, trying to peer through the darkness. The moon was quite fair that night, but now it was covered by clouds, and its pale rays didn’t quite reach the ground. The soldier couldn’t see what was coming yet, but he did feel an inexplicable sense of foreboding. It was like a chill running through his skin, trying to alert him of something ominous to come.

This soldier’s intuition, which he’d built through years of fighting, was substantial. Such intuition was the sum of one’s experience unconsciously guiding them to the answer. There was no logic to it, and it couldn’t be explained with words, but it was by no means baseless drivel.

“This...could be a night raid,” the sentry said. “Someone call the captain over, just to be safe.”

One of the other soldiers nodded and hurried to the guard room.

The sentry wasn’t sure what was happening yet. If his prediction was off, the captain would surely rake him over the coals for this blunder. He could be punished with extended guard duty too. But if he were to fail to notice a night raid, his head would quite literally be on the chopping block.

“Dammit, it’s too dark to make anything out.”

“But there’s definitely something there...”

There were watch fires on the walls, but their light had a very limited range. They could see what was directly beneath them, but anything standing a few feet away was still shrouded in darkness. Nonetheless, they could feel some sort of presence in the dark. And as the moonlight spilled from a gap among the clouds, they finally saw what it was.

“What’s that? Are those enemies?” one of the soldiers asked, pointing toward the woods in the distance.

It was a small black stain, difficult to make out from afar without straining one’s eyes. As the soldiers all gazed at it, little by little, it took on a distinct shape.

“No, that doesn’t look like soldiers. I guess it’s not a night raid, but...what is this, then?”

It was people. Dozens of people. Hundreds of people. More than they could count. They moved in a disorderly fashion, with no one leading or organizing them. This made it clear that they weren’t

soldiers.

“But even if they’re not soldiers, there’s just...too many of them. What is this?” one of the sentries asked, his expression contorting.

The people formed a line that extended from the woods. There weren’t just hundreds of them, but thousands—possibly even ten thousand.

“What in the blasted hell? There’s so many of them. They’re filling up the highway.”

The sight of so many people silently walking along the road to Epirus filled the soldiers’ hearts with fear. But their attention was suddenly drawn to the sound of a horse galloping. A single messenger rode through the darkness. The soldiers’ gazes gathered on him, illuminated by the watch fires.

He stopped in front of the gate and shouted, “Open the gates! Open the gates! I’m a servant of Viscount Eringland! I come bearing an urgent message from my lord! Open the gates!”



The soldiers exchanged looks.

“Viscount Eringland? That’s one of the ten houses of the north, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, I think their heir is here in Epirus right now.”

“An urgent message from the viscount? That’s important.”

Normally, the city gates remained locked during the night and only opened at dawn. It was basically forbidden to enter the city at night, a rule maintained across all cities on the continent. There were exceptions to that rule, though. The gates could be opened in case of emergencies like bandit raids or monster attacks. But this time, there was another reason the gates were shut—the war with the Mikoshiba barony.

The enemy’s camp was a good distance away, but not far enough to discredit the possibility of them trying to sneak in under the cover of darkness. And the figures emerging from the forest were definitely heading toward Epirus.

Should the soldiers usher them in or force them to turn back? That question weighed on them, but being common soldiers, they didn’t know if they could make that call. They could only hope their superior officer would appear soon and resolve the issue. All the while, they listened to the messenger’s calls, begging them to open the gates.



A man called out to the two girls walking by his sides. They both had tears in their eyes. The bags on their backs were digging into their shoulders. Their bodies were used to working in the fields, but after days of walking, their legs were beginning to buckle under the strain. Despite this, the man tried his hardest to smile for his daughters. He knew that if he didn’t, it would just drum up more fear in their hearts.

“Just a little longer. We’re almost to Epirus. I know it’s hard, but just bear with it a little longer.”

They nodded and continued their march, ignoring their aching legs.

In truth, even walking felt like a laborious task now. They’d probably already begged their father to carry them. Yet even though they were so young, they naturally understood that no amount of crying would achieve anything. There were other people around, yes, but they were in no position to help their fellow man. They had their hands full taking care of themselves and their families. No one would care for a young girl’s weeping. It was the same as how those girls and their parents had coldly disregarded strangers on the way here.

There was only one way to survive in this situation: force one’s

legs forward and make way to Epirus.

“It’ll work out. Once we get to Epirus, we’ll manage. It should be just past the woods, so be patient for just a little longer.”

Before long, they emerged from the woods, and the imposing contours of Epirus surfaced in the dark of night. The man pulled on his daughters’ hands, repeating the same words over and over, knowing all the while that doing so was nothing more than consolation.

The clear, unclouded sky spanned as far as the eye could see. Sunlight enveloped the ground, and the occasional breeze calmed their hearts. Such mornings felt rare this year, and in most cases, people would rejoice at such fine weather. Sadly, the world was not fair to everyone. Though the weather’s graces extended to one and all, the same could not be said of other forms of fortune. And the citadel city of Epirus was now overflowing with such unfortunate folk, incapable of appreciating the fine weather.



A group of soldiers on horseback, clad in polished white armor, moved along Epirus’s paved main street. The people around them regarded them with resignation and disgruntlement, their dark gazes full of deep-seated anger. It was how an abused, overworked slave might glare at their master.

“This is pretty horrible. Is it the same everywhere else?” Robert asked one of the knights at his side, his face contorted from the stench of excrement and sweat.

His voice was surprisingly feeble, a weakness one wouldn’t normally expect out of a man like Robert. But anyone would feel the same if they were to look at these people. Robert was, in fact, taking it better than most. The young knights at his side were faring much worse.

“No. I’m sad to say it, but it’s actually much worse in other streets,” the knight replied with a sigh. “We frequently patrol the main streets, so it helps maintain the peace. However, closer to the walls or in the back alleys, things are terrible. And it’s worse than that outside the gates. It’s hell out there.”

As he spoke, the knight looked around cautiously as if he were in the middle of enemy territory. He’d hardly gotten any sleep the last few days, and he had bags under eyes.

What a headache. This is what it looks like when we’re keeping the peace? I guess it makes sense. Guess that’s how the war’s been influencing the country.

The general opinion was that as long as Count Salzberg held onto

Epirus and drew the war out, they could win in the long run. Normally, the defending side in a siege had an overwhelming advantage. In fact, Epirus had the history to back up that claim. It once withstood a siege of fifty thousand men with countless weapons in a war against Myest. Unfortunately, this time, things were different.

It had all changed when the first group of refugees had appeared on the outskirts of Epirus two weeks ago. All of a sudden, there had been shouting at the city gates. Disputes had broken out between the refugees and the city's residents. Robert had wordlessly ordered the knights behind him to act.

I'll need to discuss what to do about this situation with Signus, huh?

Robert wasn't happy about having to fight in this war to begin with. He sighed and looked up to the count's estate standing behind him.



"And that's why, Count Salzberg, I'm asking you to let my people into Epirus," Viscount Bahenna said, repeatedly slapping his hand on the table. "Leaving them outside the south gate like this is too cruel. Don't you agree?"

Given the viscount's rank as a noble, he was acting quite inappropriately. The fact that he was willing to go this far was proof of his desperation. His face was red and twisted with anger, and he completely disregarded any notions of etiquette and decorum.

Seeing him like that, Count Salzberg sighed for what felt like the hundredth time that day.

"I agree. It's cruel. I can relate to how you feel, Viscount Bahenna. But do understand that though Epirus is the biggest city in northern Rhoadseria, there is a limit to how many people it can accommodate."

Viscount Bahenna leaned forward. He understood what the count was saying, and that was exactly why he was asking him to let *his* people into the city instead of the other nobles' subjects.

"I only have several thousand subjects. I'm sure you can find a place for them if you try."

The viscount's reasoning was sound; the city could accommodate a few thousand more refugees. But Count Salzberg had no intention of meeting Viscount Bahenna's demands. Or rather, regardless of his intentions, the count couldn't accept them. And so he repeated the same words he'd spoken countless times already today.

"Right now, we're in the middle of a war with Baron Mikoshiba and his army. They haven't made a move for the last ten days, but that doesn't mean we can be careless. We need to preserve all the food we can at the moment."

Viscount Bahenna scoffed. There wasn't any hint of his usual self-

deprecating attitude. He glared at Count Salzberg with the madness of a man backed against the wall.

“Yes, what you say makes sense, Count Salzberg. But as governor, I can’t leave my people to starve. It would besmirch my honor. My house has been loyally serving you for many years. I ask that you take that into consideration.”

The two nobles glared at each other from across the table. Neither were willing to back down, but they didn’t want to resort to military threats either.

Viscount Bahenna was the first to look away. “Very well. I’ll withdraw for today. But I do ask that you keep what I said in mind.”

Viscount Bahenna realized that being any more forceful would be dangerous. He bowed his head, as if to apologize for his discourteous conduct, and left the room.

“Fool. Using his people’s well-being as an excuse. Do you think I can’t see what you’re really after?” Count Salzberg whispered angrily.

As sound as Viscount Bahenna’s claims were, there was an agenda behind them, and Count Salzberg had realized what it was. He sighed heavily and sank back in his chair. After a moment, he reached for a bell resting on the table and summoned a maid, who entered the room silently a moment later.

“Call Robert and Signus,” he ordered sharply. “Tell them it’s urgent.”

As she left, Count Salzberg closed his eyes, hoping that a way to break through the worsening state of this war might occur to him.



As soon as Signus and Robert entered the room, Count Salzberg went straight to business and said, “So, what are you going to do?”

This was how a master spoke to his vassals. There was a vast difference in rank between a count and the second son of a baron, to say nothing of a bastard sixth son. It wasn’t rude of him to skip the pleasantries and stick to business. It did come across as arrogant, however. Not to mention, it was quite unlike Count Salzberg’s usual demeanor. He normally treated them with respect and courtesy in recognition of their prowess, even as their own families mocked them. It was strange for him to act so curt.

I guess he feels so cornered that he’s given up on that facade. Still...

Signus’s heart couldn’t help but tremble in anger at Count Salzberg’s attitude. He felt like the count had betrayed the trust and respect that Signus held for him. Still, he could understand how Count Salzberg must have been feeling, the situation being what it was.

What should have been an easily won campaign had, at some point, turned into a drawn out war with no end in sight. It made sense

the count would let slip his true nature, the one he'd kept hidden until now. But even if the logical part of Signus's brain could understand that, his heart didn't want to admit it.

Stay calm. We're in the middle of a war here. Feuding over worthless pride will only make things worse.

Signus suppressed his anger and signaled to Robert with his eyes. He could tell Robert's hands were shaking.

Count Salzberg glared at the two of them. "I'm asking you one more time. What are you going to do next?"

Signus exchanged glances with Robert.

No point in lying. Might as well just speak the truth.

Count Salzberg wasn't going to like this proposal, but as commanders, they had to say it.

Signus lowered his gaze and said, "I think the safest thing would be to call for an early cease-fire."

Just a few weeks ago, anyone would have scoffed at this idea. But in the current situation, it was a valid option.

I never thought Ryoma would use the commoners as a weapon against us.

Count Salzberg's stronghold, the citadel city of Epirus, was a symbol of both northern Rhoadseria and national defense. It was an impregnable fortress. Learning from his predecessors, Count Salzberg had taken great care to keep a large supply of food and weapons in his city. When this war started, he'd gathered even more supplies. After all, even the best equipped army still marched on its stomach. Maintaining a line of supplies was crucial and one of the basics of commanding an army. Yet despite Count Salzberg's meticulous preparations, Epirus was currently lacking both food and provisions.

What had caused this change in such a short period of time? It was the countless refugees knocking on Epirus's gates and waiting to be allowed into the city. They'd come from the villages and towns of northern Rhoadseria. They had cast aside their homes and their livelihoods and traveled to Epirus in search of refuge.

What was assumed to be a detachment of Baron Mikoshiba's army had raided their villages and forced them to leave. Since most of the nobles' knights had already been relegated to the war, very few soldiers were left to defend the home front. They had allotted some troops to handle bandit raids or monster attacks, but none of the nobles had left a garrison that could fight off an army with hundreds of knights. And the enemy had taken advantage of that. They had gone through the ten houses' territories to the south of Epirus, laying waste to villages and towns.

With their homes destroyed, the people had nowhere to go, so they looked to Epirus for refuge. Perhaps they knew their governors

were there. Or maybe the enemy general, Ryoma Mikoshiba, had suggested it. The headman of one of Viscount Bahenna's villages, the one they presumed had been destroyed first, testified as much.

Signus suspected that it was indeed the truth.

Otherwise, things wouldn't have turned out like this.

The villagers had all been forced to leave their land with what little they could carry. Now they stood in the tens of thousands outside of Epirus, demanding the protection of the strongest governor in the area—Count Salzberg.

From their perspective, they'd had no other choice. All the villages and towns of the other ten houses had burned down just the same, so seeking refuge in the one city that had remained firm seemed like the only option. As the alliance leader of the ten houses of the north, Count Salzberg certainly had a duty to protect them. But the problem was that there were simply too many refugees. For as large as Epirus was, it wasn't nearly large enough to feed and accommodate the entirety of the north's population within its walls.

Should we have gone and tried to stomp out the detachment, despite the risks?

When the refugees appeared in Epirus, they'd told Count Salzberg of the situation. The Twin Blades had certainly considered going out to attack the raiding party, but the enemy had led nearly a thousand knights against Epirus, and the Twin Blades had lost the majority of their cavaliers on the second day of fighting. They had abandoned the idea since they couldn't reliably stop the enemy's interference. This had allowed Ryoma and his raiding party to run rampant across northern Rhoadseria. Because of that, Epirus now had tens of thousands of refugees knocking at its door.

The ten houses of the north were furious, since it was Robert and Signus who'd stopped them from returning to their domains. In addition, the Twin Blades had lost the first two battles, so the nobles had criticized them at every turn since. If Count Salzberg hadn't kept them in check, they might have had the Twin Blades executed by now. But if they'd tried, Robert and Signus would have resisted, and Count Salzberg's estate would have turned into the scene of a massacre. But because Count Salzberg had protected the Twin Blades, the rift between the count and the other nobles had deepened. It was clear to everyone that the most desirable course of action was to seek a cease-fire.

Count Salzberg, however, scoffed at Signus's suggestion.

"Hogwash. Yes, the war may have gone in unexpected directions so far, but that doesn't mean we're at a disadvantage. We have more troops than they do, and we're not hurting for supplies either."

Signus shook his head, his expression grave.

That's what I thought you'd say.

Count Salzberg's answer was predictable. He knew a cease-fire was the safest option, but it would mean casting aside his pride. It would mean begging an upstart noble like Ryoma for mercy. Any negotiations between them would force him to discard his title as the alliance leader of the north and surrender to the Mikoshiba barony. Thomas Salzberg, head of the Salzberg house, would never, ever tolerate that.

Signus carried on, though he knew it was useless, because it was his responsibility as a military commander.

"We do have the advantage. Nevertheless, if this war continues, I believe it would be very difficult to win. The enemy is intent on killing us. They're probably on the defensive and waiting for us to launch an attack, just so they could halt our attempt. And I'm not sure we'll be able to break through as things stand."

Signus then turned to Robert, who was standing beside him. "Robert, what do you think?"

"I launched an attack on them yesterday, but they're well organized," Robert explained. "They're as firm as one of the kingdom's knight orders, even. Their equipment is good too, and they were able to block our charge. I'd love nothing more than to fight them, but..."

Robert shrugged. Fighting them was a thrilling gamble, and normally he would have gone for it, but not when his life was the bargaining chip and the odds were this uncertain.

"It's probably impossible to beat them in battle now, when the ten houses are this disoriented," Robert added.

Count Salzberg sighed and shook his head. Everyone was dissatisfied with this, and the situation greatly limited the count's options as the alliance leader.

"Yes, they're disoriented. And Baron Mikoshiba was crafty enough to take advantage of that."

Epirus was currently abuzz with countless concerns, making it impossible to effectively control the place. For starters, the city's residents and the refugees were constantly feuding. The residents thought the filthy refugees were an eyesore and a nuisance. Even though the city's granaries were full, the food supply wasn't bottomless. And there was a shortage of housing to accommodate the refugees. The residents would argue with them about anything, from the watering holes to the food rations.

Of course, not all the residents disliked the refugees. Some had handed out food and clothes at the beginning. But the sheer number of refugees that flooded the city had crushed those small acts of kindness. For instance, an old couple had gone through the streets with a large pot of soup, intent on filling the bellies of many refugees.

They had done it strictly out of good will. But their pot of soup couldn't feed all the refugees in the city.

The couple had been content with doing what they could. In their eyes, doing something, no matter how small, was better than doing nothing. They'd just wanted to help as many as they could. Sadly, only the old couple had seen it that way.

Any person staving off hunger who saw them giving away food would beg for some too. And how would that person feel if, when it was their turn to get a serving, they were told there was no food left to give? The correct response would be to thank the old couple for their charity and walk away. But ethical thought crumbled in the face of starvation.

The angry refugees had eventually lynched that kind old couple. If you couldn't save everyone, perhaps it was best to avoid raising their expectations and giving them false hope.

Cases like that had happened all over Epirus the last few days, so it was understandable that the city's residents were wary of the refugees. But that only applied to the refugees lucky enough to get inside the city's walls. Many more were clamoring outside the city at the southern gate.

Count Salzberg's favor hardly extended outside the city, and the governors had been approaching him every day on behalf of their people. The refugees inside the walls received at least a small amount of food, while those outside were forced to sleep hungry on the cold earth. The disparity was a recipe for discontent.

Neither the refugees nor their governors could stand for this. Even the nobles who only saw their commoners as tools knew they had to look after them when the situation called for it. But no matter how much the heads of the ten houses pleaded with him, Count Salzberg couldn't change his decision to keep the refugees out. Water and food were finite resources, and their supply chain wasn't fast enough to keep up with this kind of demand. Count Salzberg was headed toward a dead end with no escape.

"They're like locusts," Count Salzberg grumbled.

Locusts? Yeah, I can see what he means.

The refugees trembled in fear and sought salvation. But if one were to extend a helping hand to them, they'd consume everything. They really were like a swarm of locusts, devouring all life in their path.

As the three men continued to discuss the situation, the sunset cast a red glow into the room, like an omen of their fates.



To the south of Epirus spanned a wide, vast forest. In the heart of

that forest was a small clearing, where countless tents and campfires were set up.

A curtain of thick clouds hung in the sky, blocking out the moonlight and leaving nothing but the dark to govern the night. Slipping through the darkness, a man silently entered Ryoma's tent like a shadow and kneeled before him.

"Milord, we've just received a report from the leader."

Unsurprised by his sudden appearance, Ryoma responded as he examined a map spread before him.

"There weren't any problems, I hope?"

"No. Everything went according to your instructions. We're ready to begin whenever you give the word, milord."

"Good. I gotta hand it to Jinnai; he gets the job done. You can tell he's a professional."

"No, milord, it's all thanks to your inscrutable plan."

Ryoma's expression contorted for a second. The shadow wore a mask that hid his features, but he had the voice of a man in his thirties. Ryoma wasn't nearly brazen enough to indifferently accept such unrestrained praise from a man twice his age.

"Inscrutable plan," huh? A pretty pretentious way of putting it. I can't exactly deny it, though. Talk about mixed feelings.

Given what was going to come next, Ryoma couldn't show any weakness as the man in charge. He was about to order them to risk their lives. But only murmuring a word of thanks felt just as foolish.



After a moment of thought, Ryoma simply shrugged. He wasn't comfortable responding like that, but rather than say something careless, he decided a wordless reply was more appropriate to the situation.

Our bomb is set up in Epirus. Now it's just a question of when to trigger it.

Ryoma picked up a black game piece and placed it over Epirus on the map. That single black piece sat between two white pieces. Atop it was a small flag with the Mikoshiba barony's sigil—the silver and gold two-headed snake.

Ryoma's eyes scanned the map, confirming the number of game pieces. There were several dozen of them, and each one's shape and size stood for the type and size of an army. They were also one of three colors: black, white, or wooden pieces that hadn't been painted. The black ones were units on Ryoma's side, and the white ones were enemy units. The wooden ones were neutral forces.

The black ones representing Ryoma's army had the fewest pieces on the map, most of them on the plains to the northeast of Epirus. Except for the piece he'd just placed over the citadel city, each large black piece was surrounded by at least three large white ones.

One large piece was a soldier bravely holding a shield, and it stood for Lione's unit. Another small piece, a soldier holding a sword, was stationed over Fort Tilt, which guarded their base of operations in the city of Sirius. Lastly, a soldier on horseback sat on the forest to the south of Epirus and represented Ryoma's unit.

Ryoma had twenty-five hundred troops, which was an exceptionally large army for a barony, especially since they could all use martial thaumaturgy on the same level as knights. Still, the enemy's army was larger. There were only two large white pieces on Epirus, but all around them were over ten wooden pieces of people holding hoes. These were the refugees flooding the city.

Ryoma didn't count the refugees as his enemies, but they could end up becoming his opponents depending on the situation. And there were so many of them. Most were amateurs who had never held a sword or spear, but one didn't necessarily need a weapon to kill someone else. They could throw stones or scatter oil to start fires. And even if they weren't skilled in combat whatsoever, once there were tens of thousands of them, they could quickly become a threat.

Do I move Helena from defending Tritron to help conquer Epirus? Or...

Ryoma stared at a wooden piece on the border with Xarooda. He'd already completed the negotiations with Helena behind the scenes, but he hadn't determined the right time to put her to use.

The same could be said of Count Zeleph and Count Bergstone, but

when it came to using the ace up one's sleeve, timing was everything. Besides, while the O'ltormea Empire was silent at the moment, they could launch another invasion on Xarooda at any time. With that in mind, moving Helena away from the west, where she was applying pressure on them, would have to be a last resort.

If all I want is to win this war, I could call Helena to come to Epirus. But now that I have that bomb there, it feels like a bad move. And Queen Lupis could still send reinforcements from the capital, so we should probably keep Helena where she's at, just in case.

Ryoma and Helena had already made a secret pact, but few people knew about it. Queen Lupis and her vassals knew nothing of it, of course, so they would assume Helena was on their side if they took action. As such, Helena was an important piece on the board, both in terms of offense and defense.

The big question is whether the capital will send reinforcements. After what happened with Baron Vector Chronicle the other day, I ordered the Igasaki clan to keep an eye on Queen Lupis's actions, but I think the safest play is to move in on Epirus and take it out at once.

Each of Ryoma's plans were intrinsically flexible and fluid. He didn't stubbornly stick to any one plan, but instead weaved multiple plots in tandem. His method was to always control and stay on top of as many risks as possible, not unlike splitting risks in the stock market. Doing this required a mind that could consider multiple outcomes and the fortune and manpower to allow for it, so it wasn't something anyone could pull off.

"Call Mike," Ryoma told the shadow, his eyes still fixed on the map. "After that, go to Jinnai and tell him to start the next plan in the morning three days from now. We'll move in to meet you then."

"Understood." The shadow nodded and faded into the darkness.

That just leaves...

Now alone in the tent, Ryoma let out a heavy sigh. He caressed his left cheek without realizing it.



After Ryoma clashed with Vector and killed him, Sara, who'd been watching the battle play out, had hurried to his side and treated the injury immediately. It had healed quickly thanks to the nostrums from Wortenia's dark elves. Though the cut had gouged into his muscle, the wound was now gone without a trace. It only existed in Ryoma's memories now.

Baron Vector Chronicle. What was he trying to achieve?

At first, Ryoma had thought he was just a fool. But his sword skills were real, and the smile he left behind in death made Ryoma feel like there was something more to him.

I wish I could have taken him alive.

There was no one left who knew what Vector's objective was. When his subordinates saw him die, they'd all turned their blades on Ryoma. Sara and the knights had subsequently disposed of them. They were likely in the underworld with their lord now. But in so doing, Ryoma had lost the chance to gain information on Vector's plan.

I don't think this influences the progress of the war, but...

There wasn't anything substantial to base his concern on, but his sixth sense was definitely alerting him to something.

We'll have to figure this out, and fast.

As he awaited Mike's arrival, Ryoma continued pondering the events that had transpired.



Mike was writing in his tent when he felt the air subtly brush against his skin. As a key figure among the Crimson Lions, Mike could easily notice such an indistinct change, and he regarded it with suspicion.

Now, then...

Normally, one would suspect an assassin. But he was in the middle of a camp guarded by soldiers, and there were skilled Igasaki ninjas stationed to guard him. No assassin in the western continent could break through all these defenses. Even if such a skilled assassin existed, they wouldn't target Mike of all people.

Mike was relatively close to Ryoma, and he had handled Ryoma's carriage when Ryoma first visited Count Salzberg's estate. Perhaps due to that relationship, Ryoma had appointed Mike as captain of his personal guard. So while Mike's rank wasn't as high as Lione and Boltz, he was certainly a trusted member of the Crimson Lions.

But if an assassin were trying to claim someone's life, they would aim higher, like the army general or his top lieutenant. There wasn't much value in assassinating Mike. This left just one option for the unseen disturbance.

“Did something happen?” Mike asked without looking up from the parchment he was writing on.

A masked man appeared in front of him and kneeled.

“My apologies for intruding so late at night,” the messenger said. “The lord calls for you.”

“The lad? Ah, I get it. We got word from Epirus,” Mike responded, clearly unsurprised.

The first time one of those ninjas had appeared to deliver a message, Mike had been quite surprised, but he’d gotten used to it by now.

“Yes. Our leader, who infiltrated Epirus, sent word. And the lord asked for your presence.”

“Right. I guess it means Jinnai did his job well.”

The shadow said nothing. The ninjas would remain silent if it didn’t pertain to their tasks. That wasn’t to say they discarded their emotions, but they rarely let their sentiments show when on a mission.

“Did the lad say anything else?” Mike asked.

“No, he only asked that I call for you.”

“Right. Understood. Good work.”

The shadow nodded and faded back into the darkness.

“Phew. Everything seems to be going just like the lad planned. The problem is what comes next.”

Mike put the pen and paper away, rose from his chair, and looked up. As he stared at the night outside, his mind was submerged in thought. Normally, he would hurry when his leader called him, but this leader was no ordinary man.

“Why did I call you?” “What were the possible problems?” “How will they act?” “What are the pros and cons of each choice?” Ryoma always asked those around him for their opinions, so he would be disappointed if Mike ran straight to him without thinking things through.

Mike was set to work alongside Boltz to manage Epirus, so he needed to be prudent and careful. This was why he was at Ryoma’s side right now.

How do we move? Everything in Epirus is going as he planned. If we charge them now, we should be able to topple the city if we work with Jinnai, but... No, we’d take too many losses if we did that.

When all was said and done, the objective of this war was to win. If their prospects of victory were slim, they couldn’t be picky about the methods they used to achieve it. They would triumph no matter what price it might cost or what sacrifice they must make. But this time, their victory was all but guaranteed, so the way they would win became more significant. If nothing else, there was no point forcibly

taking Epirus and throwing away the lives of their soldiers.

Besides, we have to set the groundwork for the next war too.

If they won this war, Mike's young commander would become the ruler of Northern Rhoadseria. He would crush the ten houses of the north and usurp their rights to their territories. At that point, the Mikoshiba barony would occupy a fourth of Rhoadseria's territory.

Ryoma's domain would be as large as a dukedom in both name and substance. But Rhoadseria's queen, Lupis Rhoadserians, wouldn't overlook his actions. She would definitely attack him. And that conflict wouldn't end until either Ryoma or Queen Lupis died. All of Ryoma's subordinates followed him knowing this.

At the time, I never thought things would come to this.

A bitter emotion filled Mike's heart. Ryoma and Lupis had joined forces because of Rhoadseria's civil war. It had started with a scheme concocted by Wallace, the guild master of Pherzaad, the largest trade port in Myest. Ryoma and Lione's Crimson Lion group had found themselves in a crisis, and they'd needed the backing of someone powerful to protect themselves. At the same time, Lupis had been in dire need of someone who could help her resolve her own problems.

And so a talented man with no authority met a weak woman with royal command. Their meeting felt preordained. Though, at the time, Lupis hadn't had much authority. She'd merely clung to her title as princess. Though she was heir to the throne, Hodram Albrecht had truly held power.

Still, it felt like fate had guided Ryoma to Lupis's side. Had their relationship remained favorable, poets would have no doubt sung of their heroic saga for centuries to come. Yet that honeymoon period ended all too quickly. Their relationship fractured, leading to this rebellion.

I can understand Queen Lupis's feelings, though.

Mike had spent his entire life in this world's class system, so he could empathize with Lupis.

It was unclear if someone had put the idea in Lupis's head or if she'd concluded on her own that Ryoma was dangerous, but either way, Queen Lupis decided to lock Ryoma in the Wortenia Peninsula in the hopes that he'd stay there until he died.

Nothing was scarier to a ruler than a low-ranking person with skill. Those in a position close to the ruler were often ambitious. While their talents made them useful vassals, their abilities highlighted the ruler's inadequacies and foolishness.

Not every ruler felt this way, however. A ruler's job was to efficiently manage their human resources. But ideals didn't always become reality, and this was a turbulent world full of war. One couldn't even trust their own family.

A ruler who found themselves with a skilled vassal they couldn't trust had three options: ruthlessly dispose of that vassal, give them a weak post where they can't be promoted, or send them to a frontier land and keep them there until they die. With only these options, one could say Lupis's decision was appropriate. Killing him would have certainly saved her future trouble, but in the end, her ego had dictated her decision...and deepened the fissure between them. By leaving the serpent free to slither through her garden, she allowed it to feed on prey and sharpen its venomous fangs.

Snapping out of his thoughts, Mike rose to his feet and left the tent. As he walked to his destination, the clouds parted, revealing a full moon. He looked up at it and cracked a ferocious smile.

"The moon sure is fine tonight..."

It was a red moon, heralding the wars to come.



Chapter 4: The City of Galatia

The sun cast its gentle glow over the earth. That day, a group dressed in extravagant clothes reached the town of Galatia, a settlement on the southern edge of Rhoadseria. Whoever these people were, they were obviously of high status.

At the head of the caravan was a highly decorated, expensive-looking carriage, and behind it followed a long row of knights. Their heads were held high, and the banner of the Church of Meneos flapped above them. Temple Knights clad in white armor surrounded the carriage.

“Very well. You have permission to enter our country,” a commissioner told Rodney. Unsurprisingly, the man’s attitude was all business.

Finally. It sure took you a while.

Rodney held back the urge to say that aloud because the man oversaw entry into Rhoadseria. Feuding here could lead to their permit being revoked, and they’d gone to such lengths to obtain it.

Rodney bowed to the man, made his way to the leading carriage, and knocked on the door.

“My apologies for the long wait, Cardinal Roland.”

The cardinal laughed jovially from inside. “You’ve nothing to worry about. Entering a country is cumbersome no matter where you are. You are not at fault here.”

Rodney and Cardinal Roland had been on friendly terms for a long time. Those around Rodney had heavily criticized him, but Cardinal Roland was among his most influential backers. Be that as it may, the cardinal was currently an emissary on orders from the pope, and Rodney was nothing more than a guard escorting him. Things would be different if they were in private, like in a room at an inn, but in public, Rodney had to stand on ceremony.

“Much obliged,” Rodney replied, bowing his head.

“Not to worry. I’m well aware of how hard you’re all working. I’m grateful, and not at all displeased with you,” Cardinal Roland said, laughing.

The cardinal was correct. Galatia was near the border with Tarja, one of the southern kingdoms, making it an important checkpoint. Things between the Kingdom of Tarja and the Kingdom of Rhoadseria were stable at present, but the two counties had clashed many times

before, resulting in countless casualties. Because of this, anyone entering Galatia had to undergo strict inspections.

However, this caravan had been delayed for two months, and not just because of inspections. Rhoadseria was extremely wary of a foreign force entering their borders. This was why even an official emissary from the Church of Meneos had been stalled and forced to remain within Tarja.

Rhoadseria's caution didn't come as a surprise. With the state of the kingdom being as chaotic as it was, a foreign country's interference could lead to the kingdom's destruction. Their concern was all the more understandable considering that the Church of Meneos wasn't a mere rival or neighboring country, but a vast, powerful entity that exceeded any nation. Rhoadseria likely had no idea how to handle them. Denying the church entry could worsen their relationship, but they didn't know what might happen if they let the party enter.

Cardinal Roland could understand their hesitancy, but he was on orders from the pope. He couldn't return to the holy city empty-handed just because Rhoadseria denied him entry. He wasn't a child on an errand, after all.

Thankfully, Rodney and Menea had been able to use their connections to ask a Tarjan noble to negotiate with Rhoadseria on their behalf. And today, they were finally granted permission to enter the kingdom. It was all thanks to their blood, sweat, tears, and money.

Not many would acknowledge the fact that Menea and I did that, though.

Even clergymen were human, and doing nothing but waiting for two months would make anyone upset. This was especially true for cardinals, who had the same power and authority as a high-ranking noble. Depending on the situation, even a king might have to kneel before a cardinal. If Roland were to aggressively insist, he could have his way with just about anything. Being the powerful and influential man that he was, Roland wouldn't need to thank Rodney verbally. In fact, most other cardinals would have rebuked Rodney for his incompetence.

The important thing was that they'd finally gained entrance into the country, but Rodney couldn't feel pleased about that. They were only halfway through their journey to Pireas. Once they reached the capital, they'd need to meet with Queen Lupis. And therein lay the true objective of their trip—investigating Ryoma Mikoshiba.

We just have to deal with things as they come for now. First, we'll meet with Count Winzer and plan for what comes next...

Rodney raised his hand to signal to the driver, and the carriage began moving through Galatia's gates.

Their party was like a living, breathing incarnation of God's might and majesty—a symbol of fanatical faith. As they descended from the carriage and began walking, even the civilians of this eastern kingdom, where the influence of the faith was weaker, parted to allow them to pass. Though it was the main street of a large city, all the tumult died down in their presence. They silently and solemnly continued their procession, approaching a large inn in the center of the city—The Golden Sunlight Inn.



Tachibana sat in a chair by the window in Asuka's room, sipping on a cup of tea. Asuka had prepared the tea herself, though she'd asked the inn's employees for the ingredients. She sat opposite of Tachibana, her expression downcast.

Why would Tachibana come to my room?

Tachibana had said that he had some time on his hands and wanted to speak to her, but Asuka had already guessed that Menea was the one behind his visit. Even if Asuka weren't a teenage girl, a man visiting a woman's room was unacceptable, no matter which world they were in. Tachibana was well aware of this, so he must have had a good reason to come anyway as soon as they entered Rhoadseria.

I'm glad Menea cares this much, but she's being a bit overprotective.

Menea and Rodney had saved Asuka's life and become her guardians in this world. She'd parted ways with her granduncle, Koichiro, and his whereabouts were still unknown. With him gone, Menea and Rodney were the only people she could turn to in this world.

She was, of course, very grateful to them, but sometimes their assistance felt suffocating. That wasn't to say that she had no freedom. She wasn't physically bound with shackles like a slave, nor was she ever locked up in a cell. But compared to her life in Japan, she was much more restricted.

Those restrictions were there for a reason, though. Asuka had only been allowed to live in the holy city of Menestia because Rodney had made arrangements for her with the help of Cardinal Roland. Were it not for their influence, Asuka would have surely ended up the mistress of some high-ranking church member. Indeed, a few captains in the Temple Knights had expressed interest in doing just that.

Asuka's looks had drawn their attention. Her features were fair, and her ebony hair had the sleek sheen unique to Japanese people. Most people in the western continent resembled Caucasians in Asuka's world, so her smooth skin was an attractive trait. She was a beautiful girl, more beautiful than many of the commoners. But this was

assuming that one wanted her as a wife. For those in power, things were quite different. Her features made her a desirable plaything. This was why Menea and Rodney didn't let her out of their sight.

Rodney and Menea were currently away, guarding Cardinal Roland on the way to visit Count Winzer, which left Asuka alone at the inn. But even at times like these, when they couldn't bring her along, they always left her with someone trustworthy. Asuka was something of a little sister to them, an unfortunate girl who'd stumbled into this other world. Even so, Asuka wasn't naive enough to believe that they did everything out of goodwill.

Rodney and Menea are kind people, for sure, but...they probably...

Asuka's gaze turned to the Japanese katana resting in the room's corner. This was one of two blades that belonged to her granduncle, Koichiro Mikoshiba, and he'd left it in her care...or perhaps vice versa.



I can't blame them. There's plenty I want to ask grandpa too.

How was he in possession of a blade forged with endowed thaumaturgy? How did he know about this Earth? How had he returned home after being summoned to this world?

How? Why? One question beckoned another, but only Koichiro could answer them.

That was actually the other reason Rodney and Menea were so overprotective of Asuka. What she'd told them about her granduncle should've been impossible. As far as they knew, no otherworlder in recorded history had ever returned to Rearth. Normally, they would've ignored Asuka's story and assumed she was speaking nonsense, but the fact that she had Kikka, a piece of undeniable physical evidence, changed everything.

The Church of Meneos hadn't made any significant moves against the Organization yet, but that was only because they knew nothing about them. Where were their headquarters? How many operatives did they have? Did they even exist to begin with? If they could find enough evidence that the Organization existed, then they could plot their next move.

The Church of Meneos had branches and churches all across the western continent. Though some of those weren't as influential or powerful, the church's presence was widespread, and their intelligence network exceeded the scope of any one nation. If they were to mobilize all of their resources, it wouldn't take long for them to expose the shadow organization's existence. And since Koichiro Mikoshiba seemed to hold all the answers, they had to keep Asuka safe. She was their sole connection to him. She wasn't as important as Cardinal Roland, the person they were really guarding, but Rodney and Menea would still protect her with their lives.

Though Rodney and Menea's protection was a bit restricting, Asuka didn't necessarily think it was a bad thing. Her life here was infinitely better than wandering aimlessly through this vast, dangerous continent.

As Asuka sat lost in her thoughts, Tachibana suddenly said, "It was a roundabout journey, but we finally made it here. Considering how long it's been since we were summoned, I can see just how different this world is compared to Japan. But I didn't think things would be this rigorous or harsh."

The tone of his voice spoke to the memories of their arduous journey.

"I was surprised when Rodney asked me to join them on their trip as a guard, but even then, I didn't think it'd take us this long."

It had been a year since they left the holy city of Menestia. The

trip had felt incredibly long, especially because they were from modern Japan. For example, luxury cruisers could travel around the world in roughly a hundred days. And usually trips like that were for sightseeing, so the ships would take detours across different locales. But even with those additions, it was possible to travel the forty thousand kilometers of the equator in less than four months. In this world, it took around a year just to cross the western continent.

Since transportation methods were limited here, the very premise of travel in this world was completely different. The only way a commoner could travel was by walking. Rodney, being a temple knight, had a horse, and the leader of this group, Cardinal Roland, had a carriage. Everyone else other than the highest ranking members of the group had to travel by foot, unless they were favored by the carriage owner or were too ill to travel on their own. Those on horseback would have to match the speed of those on foot. After all, the leader of the group needed his servants within arm's reach; they were the ones who fed and served him drinks.

Based on what Menea told me, it sounds like this continent is about the size of Australia, and there's five thousand kilometers between Menestia and Rhoadseria's capital. People generally walk about four kilometers per hour, so even if we walked forty kilometers a day, we still should have gotten here in four months or so. I guess I'm missing something.

It had taken them three times that to get here. Asuka's calculations were just a rough estimate based on what she'd learned of this world in the time she'd been here, so her guesses were no doubt incorrect. Besides, this world didn't have maps as accurate as the ones in her old world. Even if such a map did exist, Asuka would never see it.

Mapping techniques weren't as developed in this world, and since distances and terrains related directly to national defense, countries often kept that information secret. They did provide fairly accurate maps when it came to war or development, but those wouldn't find their way into the hands of the common citizen. The maps they'd get would only help them estimate their general direction based on mountains and forests. In other words, they were better than nothing, but not much more. If all of the western continent were eventually united under a single nation, they might make more accurate maps, but not while so many powerful nations vied for supremacy.

Besides, traveling at four kilometers per hour by foot assumes we'd be walking on a straight paved road.

There were other factors to account for when traveling in this world. One couldn't plan an itinerary based on distance alone. Even the highways connecting different cities had their own issues, like monster infestations. Barrier pillars that used endowed thaumaturgy

protected the highways by keeping monsters at bay, so one was safe as long as they remained on the road. Still, the pillars could break or stop functioning, and the monster-repelling incantations on them couldn't keep back the bigger breeds.

Also, the pillars only halted monsters; they did nothing to stop bandits and criminals. Since this world didn't have any kind of social safety net, crime was an easy way for some people to stay alive. Criminals went by many names—thieves, bandits, pirates—but there were more of them here than in Asuka's world, meaning that one was far more likely to encounter them. So while a road was safer than the wilderness, it was still rife with mortal danger.

Just the road itself had its own share of problems. The country handled maintaining and repairing the barrier pillars, but it was up to the governor in charge of that land whether the road was paved. Some governors were devoted to internal affairs, but others thought spending money on something like that was a waste. Some intentionally left the roads unpaved to impede the march of enemy armies.

The closer one came to the borders, the worse the roads became. And whenever it rained, the ground turned into a bog that impeded progress. There were other difficulties besides those to consider too.

Traveling close to mountains means risking falling rocks and landslides, and fallen trees can block off roads in the forest. But...

Those were all things Asuka had seen during their journey. When things like that had happened, they'd either taken the long way around or asked Rodney and his men to physically remove the obstacle.

However, the most dangerous factor one had to consider when traveling was war. The reason for that was simple: there were always signs before a war broke out. War devoured all manner of resources—manpower, money, supplies. Not to mention, gathering those things required preparation and a great deal of time. And the larger the war, the more grim those signs became. Small skirmishes between local governors were exceedingly problematic, but if the war was international, there was no way to hide those preparations from sight.

These wars would greatly impede travel, but there were ways to avoid the damage. If nothing else, travelers could wait in safe cities until the fighting died down. If they absolutely had to cross the country, then they could take detours that avoided the battlefield. If they were brave enough, they could even hire mercenaries and cut their way through the battlefield. Whichever option one chose, success depended on one crucial precondition: being able to read the signs of the oncoming war.

When a traveler entered a city, it would be apparent that a war

was about to break out. It was especially noticeable in the southern kingdoms, the most war-torn region in the western continent and a place where skirmishes broke out frequently. But when it came to small territorial disputes, detecting those omens could be very difficult. Unlike warring countries, where armies clashed in the tens of thousands, territory disputes between nobles only involved hundreds, sometimes even less than that. The war between Ryoma Mikoshiba and Count Salzberg was much larger, but that was an exception. Count Salzberg was the alliance leader of the ten houses of the north and had used their armies to reinforce his own. Ryoma had used his wits to expand and strengthen his army.

“It’s easy to say this in hindsight,” Tachibana added, “but if we’d known it would take us this long, we might have been better off cutting through the O’ltormea Empire to get here.”

Asuka nodded. “If we could’ve negotiated with the empire, maybe it really would have been the better option.”

Though Asuka agreed with Tachibana, she knew this wouldn’t have been possible. So did Tachibana.

The O’ltormea Empire doesn’t openly oppose the church, but they’re not on friendly terms either.

The O’ltormea Empire and the Church of Meneos had never officially crossed blades, but a huge war of intelligence was going on behind the scenes. Menea and Rodney had even fought them directly a few times, so a secret intelligence race was quite plausible.

The empire was, in fact, actively antagonistic toward the church, though it had never truly declared war. Having spent a few years in this world, Asuka had grasped the continent’s political state—not because she particularly wanted to, but because ignorance would mark her as weak. And whether one was weak could decide your fate.

A few years before Asuka was summoned to this world, the O’ltormea Empire had invaded the Holy Qwiltantia Empire, which stood between them and the southern kingdoms. The attack came as a complete surprise to Qwiltantia. At the time, O’ltormea was in the middle of an intense war with Helnesgoula in the north, so Qwiltantia had never expected the empire would start another war during that. Because of this, the O’ltormean military was able to invade quite far into their land. Of course, Qwiltantia wasn’t known as one of the western continent’s big three for no reason. It soon prepared an army of one hundred thousand troops, retook their land, and swiftly drove O’ltormea from their domain.

The O’ltormean commander who had led that expedition was slain during the retreat, and the tide of battle swung in the holy empire’s favor. Fortunately for O’ltormea, the emperor’s heir—Shardina Eisenheit’s brother—had the same talent that had enabled his father to

build his empire from nothing in a single generation. When he learned that the invasion had failed, he marched an army of twenty thousand from the O'ltormean capital, persistently resisted the Qwiltantian counter-invasion, and impressively pushed them back.

In the years that passed after that, Qwiltantia had the occasional skirmish and had to repeatedly snatch back stolen territory. The fires of war smoldered still, and the frontlines seemed to move north little by little along the border. As a result, the border between O'ltormea and Qwiltantia had become somewhat hazy.

If it had been just that, there wouldn't have been any friction between O'ltormea and the Church of Meneos. The dispute was between the two empires. But there was also a discord between O'ltormea and the church, the cause of which related to the holy city of Menestia.

For the Holy Qwiltantia Empire, Menestia was like what the Vatican is to Italy. Technically, the Vatican is an independent city state, but since it shares its economy with Italy, they have a close relationship with each other. The Church of Meneos and Qwiltantia had a very similar relationship. The main difference between Menestia and the Vatican is that the Vatican only has a population of several hundred people. It's home to the Christian clergy and their relatives alone, and it doesn't have any citizens to speak of. Menestia, on the other hand, had citizens, but they all adhered to the Church of Meneos.

From what I hear, that war was exceedingly brutal. The church's relationship with O'ltormea has been shaky ever since.

The Church of Meneos acted outside the scope of any one country, and since people all across the continent practiced its faith, it was fundamentally a neutral faction. Sometimes, however, one's principles masked the truth. The church's base of operations was in the heart of Qwiltantia, so it was only natural that the two had forged a close relationship.

Their relationship was most noticeable when a nation's sovereign handed over the throne to a successor. The church always sent a member of its clergy, at least a cardinal or higher, to give their blessings to the new ruler. Regardless of how strong the church's influence was in that nation, this diplomatic rite was performed equally across the continent.

The Holy Qwiltantia Empire, one of the big three countries vying for supremacy over the continent, was the sole exception. For whatever reason, the Church of Meneos didn't dispatch messengers to bless their new kings. Instead, they had another tradition. The new emperor would visit Menestia, and the pope would crown them personally and give his blessing.

Needless to say, this was an extremely special privilege. True, Qwiltantia's capital and Menestia weren't far from each other, but if distance was the only factor, then several of the southern kingdoms' capitals were just as close. None of them got that privilege, though, except for Qwiltantia. This was proof of the close relationship between the Church of Meneos and Qwiltantia.

O'ltormea had known of this relationship when it declared war on Qwiltantia, and it had ravaged the land rather viciously as a result. They never attacked Menestia, though, for fear of the church's authority. However, they did pillage and ruin the surrounding villages. Asuka had heard stories of how the corpses had piled up into mounds and the rivers had run red with blood. Considering that human rights weren't a thing in this world, those stories weren't exaggerations.

O'ltormea had also approached the Church of Meneos and high-handedly demanded that they ally with them. Their haughty attitude enraged the church, and though they didn't go as far as excommunicating O'ltormea's emperor, they did send messengers to the other countries at the request of Qwiltantia's emperor. They also deployed the Temple Knights, the greatest defenders of the holy city.

Eventually, the Temple Knights returned to Menestia and the fighting died down, but because of their history, the relationship between the Church of Meneos and the O'ltormea Empire continued to worsen. It was somewhat similar to the relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Both sides vigilantly eyed each other, waiting for the other to present a weakness. It was even rumored among the church members closest to the pope that should Emperor Lionel abdicate the throne, the pope didn't intend on sending any messengers to bless his successor.

Why, then, is the empire special in that regard?

That was a question only the highest ranking members of the church knew the answer to. Whatever the reason, the church couldn't ask O'ltormea for permission to cross their territory. As a result, their trip had ended up becoming a journey across the southern kingdoms.

Having to carry so much luggage across unpaved roads is rough. This world is too different. There're bandits too. If Rodney and Menea hadn't been there, we probably wouldn't have made it.

Asuka sighed as she thought of the differences between her satisfying life in Japan and her life in this world. Since leaving Menestia, they had been attacked more times than she could count. Each time, Rodney and his Temple Knights had protected Cardinal Roland and the caravan from the assailants. Asuka hadn't been able to do anything other than passively let them defend her.

Maybe this is how Xuanzang felt when he traveled to obtain the sutras

in Journey to the West?

If Asuka was Xuanzang, Rodney was surely Sun Wukong. And Menea, as his collected advisor and helper, was Sha Wujing.

Which I guess means Tachibana is Zhu Bajie?

Asuka couldn't help but chuckle as she looked at Tachibana, imagining him with a pig's gut.

Zhu Bajie was a pig demon who marshaled the Heavenly Navy Soldiers. In *Journey to the West*, he was mostly a joke character who served as a foil for Sun Wukong. He did have more time to shine than Sha Wujing, who was more of a passive character, but he was still a glutton, a drunkard, and a womanizer. Despite being a priest, Zhu Bajie prioritized his worldly desires, and those got him in trouble every time. Such a person would be despised in real life, but this comical, almost human character was quite beloved in China, at times even surpassing Sun Wukong's popularity.

Asuka had called Tachibana that because Zhu Bajie was the only character left, but Tachibana was burly and not at all a good fit for the role. Also, most Japanese people would be offended if they were called Zhu Bajie. No one would take it as a compliment. But now that she'd thought it, Asuka couldn't banish that mental image from her mind.

As Asuka snickered, Tachibana eyed her dubiously.

"What's the matter?"

"N-Nothing..." Asuka said evasively, then carried on without a hint of laughter. "I just thought we'd come a long way."

Tachibana nodded firmly and said, "Yeah, I never imagined I'd be thrown into another world like a protagonist from a light novel."

Asuka's eyes widened. "A light novel?"

Tachibana smiled softly. "Surprised I'd know about that?"

"A little, I guess," she murmured.

Asuka was surprised because she thought his comment had sounded like a classmate making a joke, but she knew better than to say that out loud. Tachibana had been a constant presence in her life since they'd been summoned to this world. They were pretty much comrades who'd lived through thick and thin together. Still, he was old enough to be her father. She didn't feel the need to be formal with him, but she didn't feel comfortable cracking jokes with him either.

"It makes sense you'd be surprised. I would be too, if I were you."

Tachibana was aware of how other people saw him. He had a solid body and a stern face. He'd spent years fighting the mafia and various crime organizations, so his body had a certain ghastly appearance. The only reason he'd read light novels was for his job. He'd read teen fashion magazines and music magazines too. He'd tried to stay up-to-date with youth culture because he'd been part of the

juvenile welfare department and needed to interact with minors.

"I'll just say it was necessary for dealing with the younger kids," Tachibana said, smiling sheepishly.

Otherworld summonings and reincarnation had become popular in web novels recently. *They're interesting, but...if only those things had stayed in fiction*, Tachibana thought.

He'd read stories about protagonists who came to other worlds and received transcendent powers, and stories about dark fantasy and terribly cruel worlds. While he wasn't a zealous fan, he had enjoyed them...before he'd been thrown into this world. That fiction had become his reality. Life in this world was hard to enjoy, namely because, unlike in those novels, Tachibana hadn't gotten any special powers.

"They say truth is stranger than fiction, but this is a whole other level of uncanny."

Misha Fontaine—the former court thaumaturgist for the Kingdom of Beldzevia, one of the southern kingdoms—had summoned Asuka and Tachibana to this world. Nearly three years had passed since then. During that time, Asuka had experienced more cruelty than she'd ever wanted to see. Since the moment her granduncle Koichiro cut off Misha's head, she'd seen countless atrocities. It reminded her that in this world, only the fittest survived.

Asuka and Tachibana looked at each other in silence, the sights from their journey flashing through their minds. But Menea hadn't asked Tachibana to go to Asuka's room for sentimental reminiscence.

Tachibana took a sip of tea to clear the air. "Well, you must be wondering why I'm here, Miss Kiryuu. Now that you've finally made it to Rhoadseria, what will you be doing next?"

Asuka didn't need to ask him what he meant by that. That question has tormented her all throughout this journey, and she'd yet to answer it.

"What do you think I should do?" Asuka pleaded, hanging her head. The conflict in her heart was bubbling up to the surface.

Tachibana merely shook his head, which conveyed his opinion louder than words.

Yes, he's right. There is no right answer.

Asuka hated that she had to ask others for advice. And she knew that Tachibana hadn't responded coldly.

But what's the right thing to do?

Rodney and Menea had saved Asuka after she'd split up with Koichiro. Even if they'd had their own agenda, she still owed them her life. Without their protection, she wouldn't have survived in this world.

But Ryoma was in the Kingdom of Rhoadseria. If she were to meet

him, he would certainly greet her like family. But the problem was that the Church of Meneos's relationship with Ryoma was uncertain. Based on what Rodney had told her, they didn't oppose him at present. But the high-ranking church members did regard him as a potential threat because of how he'd developed the Wortenia Peninsula and quickly risen to power.

The church's intelligence network had already learned that Gaius Valkland, the former court thaumaturgist for the O'ltormea Empire, had summoned Ryoma. They also knew that Ryoma had been a part of the Rhoadserian expedition that stopped O'ltormea's invasion of Xarooda. Those alone were enough to mark him as a hero, but there were still too many inexplicable things about him. Asuka wasn't sure about those things herself, which made her hesitant about meeting him. She wasn't intent on siding with the church, but she couldn't believe in Ryoma unconditionally either.

Who even knows how a conversation with Ryoma would go, and it could possibly lead to battle. And we have too many guards.

Even though the cardinal was an important man who required bodyguards, several hundred palace knights felt excessive. It was clear what the Church of Meneos was thinking. On the surface, they came to Rhoadseria to bless the newly appointed Queen Lupis and visit the churches along the way. But that wasn't their true objective. They came all the way to Rhoadseria to confirm what kind of influence Ryoma Mikoshiba might have on the church. Based on what they found out, they could choose to eliminate him right then and there.

And if that happens...

The thought of Rodney fighting Ryoma sent a chill down her spine. That was one of the worst possible outcomes Asuka could imagine, but she didn't know how to avoid it. It would be best if Ryoma joined hands with the church, but Asuka knew this religious group had both a light and a dark side. Their light shone without fault, but the darkness they harbored ran deep. She knew Ryoma well enough to understand that he could never forgive the evil brewing within them.

"I don't want to fight him, but..." Asuka whispered. She held back her sob, then fell silent.

Tachibana sighed. *It makes sense she'd be conflicted. It's like Menea suspected.*

Tachibana owed Koichiro a debt of gratitude for saving his life, but he felt nothing for Ryoma, especially now that Rodney had invited him to live under the church's wing. Tachibana wasn't the slightest bit conflicted. But Asuka was different. She was torn between her benefactors and her own flesh and blood. It wasn't an easy decision. In his forty years of life, Tachibana had survived countless scenes of

violence, and even he didn't know what he'd do if he were in her shoes. All he could do was comfort her with neutral words.

"Well, you don't have to force yourself to come up with an answer right now," he said with a soft smile. "First we need to meet their queen. And before that, we need to wait for Rodney to return. They went to this city's governor to arrange everything."

A shadow settled over Tachibana's face. He knew his words hadn't really solved anything.



Around the time that Asuka and Tachibana were talking in her room at the Golden Sunlight Inn, Koichiro Mikoshiba was in an alleyway inn near the heart of Galatia, taking in the scent of the tea he was drinking.

Simply lovely...

The tea had been brought to boiling and left to cool, so it was now the ideal temperature. The leaves had also been cooked inside the pot for a few minutes beforehand, boosting the flavor.

Honestly speaking, being around Liu Daijin meant that Koichiro often had Chinese teas, like Oolong tea. Drinking a more traditional tea like this one made him feel back home for the first time in a while since he'd returned to this world.

Of course, no ordinary inn would serve this kind of tea. On the outside, this one looked like a dirty, derelict establishment, and indeed, most of its rooms were no different from that of a seedy love hotel on the city outskirts. The place didn't serve meals either, offering only a bed to sleep on. Besides the bed, the rooms were furnished with a wooden table and chair. There were no cupboards or vases, only a lone window. But perhaps the lack of natural light was best, because the bedsheets were yellow from repeated washings and were likely full of mites and ticks.

Saying the room was simple was an understatement. It was only good for a place to sleep, and it was hardly even good for that. It was better than a barn or stable in that one would have a rooftop over their head, but that was the only good thing to say about the place. If one really tried to come up with another positive, it would be that the rent was appropriately cheap. However, the rooms being what they were, anyone with coin in their pocket would look for somewhere better. Even the poorest traveler could probably find better lodgings in the alleyways.

That wasn't to say the inn had no foot traffic. It wasn't going bankrupt either. After all, the manager was involved with the Organization. And unbeknownst to most, the inn had one room that was unlike the others.

This special room occupied the entirety of the inn's basement. Only a select few of the staff even knew it existed. It was exceedingly luxurious, almost excessively so. Works of art hung along the walls, and expensive bottles of alcohol lined the shelves. Those who stayed here could order a meal cooked by a master chef or beckon young women to keep them company. It left nothing to be desired. On top of that, the rent was free. If the room had any flaws, it was that it was underground and had no windows. And since it was hidden, one had to be careful about their movements.

It was in this room that Koichiro Mikoshiba sat sipping his tea in a rare moment of luxury.



Unfortunately, that moment didn't last much longer. Zheng Motoku entered, ready to deliver the report Koichiro had been waiting for.

"My apologies for the wait, Master Koichiro. The caravan entered the city earlier today."

Koichiro nodded. "I see. Finally," he said, overcome with emotion.

"Yes, they arrived at noon," Zheng added, bowing deeply.

"Raise your head, Zheng. I forced you to take this troublesome job."

Koichiro bowed his head in response, grateful for what Zheng had done.

Zheng had pulled strings and pressured the Organization members into arranging this room for Koichiro, who would wait there for Cardinal Roland and his entourage to arrive in the city. But as grateful as Koichiro was to Zheng, Koichiro wasn't obligated to bow his head to him.

Despite Koichiro's attitude, Zheng kept his head lowered as he said, "But approaching them now might be..."

It was clear that whatever he was about to say next wasn't easy to admit, but Koichiro soon understood what Zheng was trying to say.

"I suppose that's only natural," he whispered, sounding displeased yet resigned.

There was a lot that Koichiro wanted to say. Cardinal Roland's entourage had dawdled for so long that it had thrown Koichiro's plans off schedule. He'd only come here in the first place for the Organization's yearly meeting, which was to take place in Pherzaad, a city in the Kingdom of Myest.

Koichiro had hoped to rescue Asuka and, at the same time, arrange a meeting with one of the Organization's elders, Akemitsu Kuze. After that, he'd wanted to go to O'tormea's capital city, where he would meet Akitake Sudou. Koichiro had heard of this dangerous man and wished to learn his intentions.

This isn't our world. Traveling across the continent takes time, and monsters are a hindrance. I wasn't expecting their journey to go smoothly, but...

Though he understood that, Koichiro wasn't pleased with how long it had taken. He hadn't meant to vent his frustrations to Zheng, though. Zheng only tended to Koichiro's needs under orders from Liu Daijin. Nevertheless, Koichiro couldn't help but complain just a little.

Blast it all. Where did my calculations go wrong?

There were a few reasons Koichiro's plans had gone awry, but it boiled down to two major miscalculations. The first was that Cardinal Roland had decided to also visit the southern kingdoms' churches—

quite the long detour. That meant they'd had to take the overland route. The cardinal's decision surprised not only Koichiro, but Liu Daijin as well.

The western continent's southernmost and northernmost tips were almost diagonally opposite of each other. If one were to sail along the southern sea route, it would take them three months to get from one end of the continent to another, even accounting for wind fluctuations. If one were to reserve a ship, they could reduce that time substantially, and the Organization's hidden high-speed vessels could shorten the journey by as much as a month. However, the fact that Roland and his entourage had gone by land changed everything.

The southern kingdoms were among the most perilous lands on the continent. On any given day, there was some kind of skirmish somewhere in that region. That translated to public disorder. It was hard to tell whether the public order was worse in the southern kingdoms or in Rhoadseria, given its current state of affairs. As one might expect, Cardinal Roland's journey had been stalled several times.

I didn't expect he'd bring that many bodyguards either.

That was Koichiro's second miscalculation. Cardinal Roland brought five hundred knights with him as bodyguards. A man of his station couldn't travel as far as Rhoadseria alone and unguarded, but usually a cardinal brought a hundred knights at most. Roland brought five times that number. It wasn't an entourage of bodyguards; it was a military expedition.

Because of the large number of knights, they had difficulty entering the southern kingdoms, even though the Church of Meneos was influential there. No matter how fervently those countries followed the church, there was a difference between accepting a small entourage of knights into their borders and letting an army march through their lands. Plus, said knights were Rodney Mackenna's Temple Knights, who boasted the greatest martial prowess in all the Church of Meneos. Any country would be hesitant to let them cross their borders.

As he received reports of the cardinal's travels, Koichiro couldn't help but wonder time and again how much easier it would have been if they had used the same illegal means the Organization did. What surprised him the most, though, was that each country had eventually consented to let them pass.

Still, traveling through the southern regions wasn't even the most dangerous route. Many in the south adhered to the faith, which gave the cardinal and his group a great deal of wiggle room, but that had only lasted until they'd reached the Kingdom of Tarja. Rhoadseria was quite far from the holy city, so the church's influence there was weak.

When Rhoadseria refused to let them enter, they had been forced to spend two months in Tarja. Because of that, Koichiro had canceled his meeting with Kuze.

“Thankfully, Master Kuze said he would be willing to meet you whenever you contacted him,” Zheng said.

“Who knows when I’ll be able to do that,” Koichiro scoffed. After all, Asuka’s journey wasn’t going to end here.

I doubt anything good will come from all of this.

Honestly, Koichiro was sick and tired of this whole affair, but he couldn’t let Cardinal Roland’s entourage leave.

Maybe it’d be easier to just attack them? He banished that dangerous thought from his mind. *No. That’s too much of a risk.*

Koichiro had sent Zheng to investigate the entourage, and apparently Rodney Mackenna’s deputy, Menea Norberg, had been guarding Asuka and the two had formed a close relationship. Perhaps thanks to that, Cardinal Roland himself was acquainted with Asuka, and she led a relatively peaceful life in Menestia.

Koichiro was grateful for that. This world didn’t suit Asuka Kiryuu, and she was incredibly lucky to have found someone who’d keep her safe. Sadly, that stroke of luck worked against Koichiro and made it hard for him to rescue her.

Asuka often interacted with Rodney and his direct followers, so she was constantly protected by five hundred knights. Nonetheless, if the Organization were to mobilize its full strength, it could easily take care of those knights. The Organization’s strongest force, the Hunting Dogs, were without a doubt a match for the Temple Knights. But there was no guarantee that Asuka would survive the fight that would ensue if they did that.

I don’t have much of a choice...

Koichiro’s only option was to keep his distance and wait for the opportune moment to rescue Asuka. However, a second later, a knock on the door wiped that resolve from his mind.

The knock came in a specific rhythm, a code that had been decided ahead of time to inform him of an emergency. Zheng glanced at Koichiro, and after Koichiro nodded, Zheng swiftly opened the door.

“What happened?” Koichiro asked. Whatever it was, it must have been urgent.

The man whispered something into Zheng’s ear, and Zheng went pale.



“There seems to have been a bit of a snag with regards to Miss Asuka,” Zheng said.

“What kind of ‘snag’?” Koichiro asked, his voice much colder than it was a moment ago.

“You see...we got a report that the Hunting Dogs are launching a raid tonight on Count Winzer’s estate.”

Koichiro clicked his tongue. “How many of them?”

“A hundred or so.”

The Organization had decided to eliminate Count Winzer, the governor of Galatia. Koichiro now understood why Zheng was so alarmed by the report.

Koichiro cared little for Count Winzer. He didn’t want the man dead, but he didn’t care if he was alive either. The same held true for anyone in his estate.

But a raid tonight was awful timing. And since Zheng had said that this concerned Asuka, it didn’t take much to figure out what he’d meant.

However, there was one thing Koichiro was dubious about.

They mobilized a hundred men from the Organization’s strongest force?

With that many men, Count Winzer’s estate would become a sea of blood and viscera. If the estate’s guards were normal soldiers who couldn’t use thaumaturgy, or even trained knights for that matter, they wouldn’t so much as leave a scratch on the Hunting Dogs—unless some of them happened to be extremely skilled.

Seeing the Organization resort to such extreme measures was rare. It always kept its existence and presence shrouded in darkness. Even when it clashed with the Church of Meneos, it refrained from acting in the open as much as possible. It didn’t make sense that they would ignore that precedent and attack a noble’s estate. There had to have been a good reason to justify this.

“What’s their reasoning?” Koichiro asked.

“Well, through whatever means, Count Winzer seems to have obtained some kind of firearm...”

Koichiro’s expression contorted.

I can’t ask the Organization to stop the attack if that’s their reason. I couldn’t even ask them to push it until tomorrow.

The Organization had to prioritize this above all else. Firearms didn’t exist in this world—no revolvers, no automatics, not even arquebuses. When people were summoned here, the only things that came with them were the items directly next to them when they were abducted. If someone were summoned in their sleep, their bed or a book they’d been reading would maybe go too.

Considering that, it was hard to imagine that no one carrying a gun had ever been summoned. Firearms had found their way into this world before, but they'd never spread to society. The Organization went to great lengths to keep the existence of firearms hidden. That was actually the Organization's greatest strength in this world. They had Rearth's technology, but they kept it secret.

Koichiro didn't know and honestly didn't care how Count Winzer had gotten his hands on a gun. The people of this world couldn't recreate one to begin with. Then the gun needed ammunition, otherwise it was a glorified paperweight, and different firearms used different types of ammunition. If a gun were summoned already loaded, it would be usable, but the chances that it would be mass-produced to an extent that it changed the face of warfare were slim.

Koichiro wasn't concerned that firearms would spread; he was concerned that Count Winzer was the one who'd gotten one. If the Organization were to maintain its superiority, it would stop at nothing to take that firearm out of his hands, no matter what it had to sacrifice to do it. The problem lay with Rodney Mackenna and Menea Norberg. They'd only just reached the city today, but as Zheng had implied, they were currently at Count Winzer's estate. Count Winzer was closely acquainted with the Rhoadserian royal family, and Rodney and Menea were approaching him to mediate their meeting with Queen Lupis.

Such bad timing...

If things had happened even a day sooner or a day later, this could have been avoided. But there was no point regretting that now. If those two were at Count Winzer's estate during the attack, they would undoubtedly fight back. Unfortunately, they were up against a hundred of the Hunting Dogs. No matter how skilled they were, they would be killed.

Koichiro had left one of his treasured katanas in Asuka's hands. If he were to find himself in Rodney and Menea's position with just one of them, he wasn't sure he'd survive either. He couldn't leave them to die, however. If something were to happen to them, Asuka would lose her protectors within the Church of Meneos.

"What shall we do? With your standing, you might be able to negotiate with them," Zheng said hesitantly.

Koichiro Mikoshiba and Zheng Motoku were both highly regarded within the Organization, and they could have perhaps arranged to have the attack pushed back a day or two. But that could compromise Liu Daijin's position. Koichiro also feared that he might lose Asuka forever if he did that.

Silence filled the room. Koichiro closed his eyes like he was meditating. Zheng watched him, saying nothing. Eventually, Koichiro

exhaled.

This is the only way to protect everyone.

His eyes alight with a burning resolve, Koichiro reached for the sword rack on the wall.

Epilogue

The human spirit has a limited tolerance. Even the strongest, most resilient person is still but a man; he can only take so much before he snaps. The problem is that people aren't necessarily aware of how long their tolerance can last. Unfortunately, unlike in video games, there's no status screen that displays this information.

It's similar to a cup filled to the brim with water. The slightest disturbance might make it overflow. Overfilling the glass by accident or bumping into someone along the way is all it would take to spill the contents.

In much the same way, emotions can exceed the heart's capacity with surprising ease. All it takes is the wrong timing for one to lose their temper. Worse yet, anger and indignation can spread to others too, like a contagion.

The smoldering fires of malice were spreading throughout Rhoadseria, and they would soon blaze again in the citadel city of Epirus...all because of one man's words.

It happened in a small inconspicuous tavern located near Epirus's walls. The area wasn't dilapidated enough to be called a slum, but it certainly wasn't an affluent part of the city. It was more a neighborhood where the poor lived. The tavern was where these people went to dream, offering them a respite from their impoverished lives. But as of late, it had become a crucible of hatred and displeasure—ever since countless refugees appeared outside the city gates.

“Ugh. It hurts.”

“Those shitheads.”

Hateful whispers and mumbles filled the bar. Normally, the only sounds were the monologues of men seeking to drown their daily fatigue with alcohol and the cheering of drunks. Today, however, the tavern's jovial liveliness had been replaced with hateful vilification.

Men lay stretched out in the establishment, their eyes glinting dangerously. A dozen or so women were busily running about among them.

“I'm sorry, Anna, but could you find something that could work as a bandage? Oh, and fetch some hot water too. We're short on hands. Go around the neighborhood, bring people here, and boil that water. Oh, and call the doctor. Hurry!”

A young woman named Anna ran out of the tavern. A middle-aged

woman knelt on the floor and tore one of the men's shirts into strips as she called out to another girl. She wasn't as skilled as a doctor, but being the proprietress of this tavern, she was used to treating injuries.

The moment she saw him, she dropped the shirt. Something viscous dripped and splattered everywhere. His stomach had been torn open, and blood was gushing out of it with each beat of his heart.

"It's a severed artery..." the woman said. "It'll hurt a little, but try to put up with it."

The woman pressed on the man's wound as hard as she could. She had to stop the bleeding, even if it meant cutting off the flow entirely. But if this were enough to stop the blood flow, she wouldn't need a doctor.

He's hardly reacting...

The man's reactions were feeble. His consciousness was muddled, and his eyes were unfocused. The woman could only watch, knowing that his life was draining out.

"Ma'am, how is he?" a woman asked, her hands clasped in front of her chest. She was visibly shaking, and her features were twisted with guilt, perhaps because she knew that she was the cause of the commotion. Tears flowed down her pale face.

"Listen, you have to stay strong. Crying and complaining won't help. If you want to save this one, get moving!" the proprietress shouted at the woman as she struggled to stop the man's bleeding.

The man had lived in this area since he was a child, and he was now a regular at the tavern. Everyone there saw one another as family, and they all were doing everything they could to save this man's life. But his injury was beyond first aid or amateur treatment.

Oh, no... His body's getting colder. Only an elven nostrum could help him now.

His pulse was growing weaker, and the bleeding became less profuse. He was on death's door.

"Brother!"

The door suddenly slammed open, and a young man hurried into the tavern. All eyes were fixed on him. His features were similar to the man lying on the floor.

"Where's my brother?!" he demanded, looking around the room with an angry glare.

"Alan... I'm so sorry..." the woman said as she sobbed even harder.

"Janice..." the young man uttered. As soon as he saw the expression on her face, he realized what had happened.

It was just a few days ago that Janice, Alan's lover, had started helping deliver food and supplies to the refugees. Count Salzberg

wasn't by any means tolerant of the commoners, but even he had to act when the war dragged on for so long. He had to appear in control in front of the ten houses of the north. Of course, the fact that Baron Mikoshiba's army had stopped pressuring them as much must have been a factor. Count Salzberg couldn't reasonably provide adequate care for everyone, but he could at least arrange for food to be distributed twice a day and for each person to get a bedroll.

The city required people to handle said distribution, and Janice accepted the job in exchange for a small wage. Those around her had tried to stop her, but she'd refused to quit. Janice was always kind to everyone. Alan loved her for that. Sadly, it ended up dooming them.

Alan stood frozen in place, his fists clenched at his side. He ground his teeth so hard he could taste iron in his mouth.

This is terrible. I knew this might happen one day. I should have put my foot down and stopped her from taking that job.

Everyone had tried to stop Janice, and for good reason. The city's people felt estranged from the refugees, and they were unhappy with their amount of rationed food and water. There were countless other reasons, but the biggest concern was Epirus's public safety.

People were flocking to the city from all over Rhoadseria, and not even a great citadel city like Epirus could accommodate everyone. Most of the refugees had escaped with only the clothes on their back. They didn't have money to stay at an inn or rent out a new home. They had no shelter from the rain and had to sleep on the wayside.

The refugees were all concentrated in the slums, and the knights didn't watch over those areas. It was only a matter of time before conflict broke out. They were all anxious about the future, ravaged by endless hunger and thirst—angered at a society that refused to help. Those negative emotions warped the people, who were but modest farmers, into something inhuman.

Alan honestly didn't know what had triggered the first quarrel. Not even the proprietress of the inn, where intelligence and information traveled freely, knew. No one had really tried to figure it out either.

But Alan did know that the residents of the slums started seeing the refugees as a common enemy as they argued about who would use the well. At first, it had been just words between two women who'd come to collect water. Before long, it had flared into full-blown enmity that resulted in a large altercation and several dozen injured. The brawl only ended when the knights arrived to break it up.

To an outsider, the whole affair would have seemed pointless. They weren't children, and it all could have been avoided if someone had stepped back and conceded. But that one clash stirred up a hatred that soon turned to malice. That malice was enough to drown out

everyone's common sense. And when people forgot that the other side was their fellow man, things could only go in one direction.

It happened just a short while ago. A young refugee had called out to Janice, who was on her way back from work. Maybe all he wanted was to thank her, or maybe he had some other intentions. There was no way of knowing now.

Unfortunately for the refugee, he had called out to her just as she was walking through an abandoned alley. A group of young men from the slums who'd branded themselves as the local militia happened to see him. Janice was adored for her beauty, so the men were even more defensive.

At first, they had just warned the refugee. However, the refugee had answered in kind, and soon enough the situation escalated. Townsfolk and refugees gathered around, and the situation devolved into a riot. But it was still just a quarrel. If things had stopped there, it would have resulted in just a few bruises.

Instead of throwing their fist, someone picked up a stone on the roadside. Then blades were drawn. It peaked when Alan's brother got caught up in the riot and someone slashed his stomach.

"It's me, brother. Can you hear me?!"

Alan gripped his brother's hands, but his brother's fingers gradually went limp. Alan then shook his shoulder and yelled into his ears.

"It's me, it's Alan! Wake up!"

As Alan called out in vain, his brother's faint breathing slowed to a stop. Alan merely sobbed, his shoulders trembling. No one could say anything as he squatted there in grief.

"I can't take any more of this!" one of the men howled. "Let's just kill them! Those vermin go around like they own the place, always saying that their governors do this, their governors do that! Why do we have to put up with this?!"

It was the howl of every citizen living in Epirus. And his anger started a chain reaction that spread throughout the city.

The battle that ensued signaled that the war was entering its final stages.

Afterword

I doubt there are many such readers left, but I welcome any new readers who picked up the series with this volume. And to those of you who have kept up with the series since volume 1, it's been four months since the last volume. This is Ryota Hori, the author.

Volume 13 is finally here. Honestly, I've been writing almost the same afterword each volume, so I'm sure many of you might be bored with it by now. One might have gotten volume 2 or 3 instead of volume 1 by mistake, or maybe they read the start on *Shousetsuka ni Naro* and decided to pick up from where they left off. But I seriously doubt anyone would start the series from volume 13. But maybe this greeting wouldn't be so strange for someone who bought all thirteen volumes in bulk.

I could change it, if I wanted, since the afterword is entirely up to the author. But since we've already done the same dance thirteen times, it might be better to leave it unchanged. They say there's beauty in patterns, and things persevere for a reason.

But let's put the matter of repetition aside and stick to our usual itinerary with this afterword. Surely that's what repeat readers came here for, yes?

The highlights of this volume are the measures Ryoma takes to begin his gradual conquest of the citadel city of Epirus, and Queen Lupis's attitude toward him. This alone took half the volume. As the Kingdom of Rhoadseria learns that the war has started, they begin acting in secret to impede Ryoma.

Queen Lupis is no different from usual, but Meltina and Mikhail are beginning to exhibit signs of growth. As the author, Lupis's tactless frankness and tendency to fret over things too much is a human side of hers I appreciate, but I certainly wouldn't want her for a superior. Working under her would probably be a drag. One almost has to respect Meltina and Mikhail for putting up with her, if you ask me.

Meanwhile, Ryoma left Lione behind to keep Epirus busy as he takes his cavaliers to attack the territories of the ten houses of the north. But as he does, a group approaches from the southern highroad. What is their objective? How will Ryoma handle it?

The other highlight of this volume is the progression of Asuka and Ryoma's grandfather, Koichiro. It's been quite a while since we've last seen Asuka, and she has Tachibana with her too. They finally reach

Rhoadseria after a great deal of trouble. The details of their journey and Koichiro's own activities at the time weren't mentioned in the web novel, so do look forward to that.

Anyway, seeing a novel I wrote as a hobby reach so many readers is the greatest joy an author can experience. There's still new heights we can reach, so watch over us as the series continues to progress and grow.

I'd like to take this chance to thank the editors and the people involved with the publishing of volume 13. And, of course, you readers as well, who enable me to continue writing this series. If all goes as planned, the next volume should be released in November of this year. Volume 5 of the manga should also be coming out. I hope you can appreciate both and continue supporting *Record of Wortenia War!*

Bonus Short Story

Vector Chronicle's Tears

The morning sun streamed through the curtains as dawn broke on another day. Vector Chronicle awakened from his slumber and silently sat up in bed...only for agonizing pain to shoot through his body. Vector closed his eyes and steadied his breathing, and the pain gradually died down. Opening his eyes again, he slowly clambered out of bed.

Slowly but surely, the pain had intensified over the last few years. Fortunately, it hadn't impeded his daily life yet. It wasn't entirely unmitigated, though. He had to withstand both the agony and the stench of his flesh decaying alive. But he could still function well enough, so he didn't forsake his duties as head of the Chronicle barony.

Sadly, the fact remained. Carrion disease was eating away at Vector's body, little by little, with the certainty and finality of a tightening noose. Some day, in the not so distant future, he would wake up to find that he could no longer leave his bed on his own.

Vector opened the window, breathing in a lungful of fresh morning air. However, not even such a clear morning could lift the haze hanging over Vector's heart. It did quite the opposite, in fact. The morning brightness only made him feel more melancholic.

"Why am I even still here?" Vector murmured, the words slipping from his lips.

At first it was the nobles' faction's tyranny. Then it was King Pharst II's death. Not long after that, the civil war started. Then the O'ltormea Empire had tried to invade their neighboring country, Xarooda. All of these major events had shaken Rhoadseria. And Vector hadn't been able to help with any of them, when normally, he would be serving Queen Lupis alongside Mikhail and Meltina.

"If this is how things are going to end, then I...I shouldn't have cast the sword aside."

This emotion had brewed in Vector's heart ever since he stepped away from his life as a knight. He did take pride in his title and the barony he inherited following his brother's passing, but when his beloved wife and son died a few years ago, the bloodline of House Chronicle had been severed.

There were other ways to continue the line, of course. His

relatives had suggested he adopt one of their children. Had it only been about passing down House Chronicle's headship, he could have let his relatives carry it on. But by that point, it would've no longer been the house he'd cast aside his career for. It would still be the Chronicle barony, but a different family and bloodline would pass it down. Vector hadn't left Lupis's service just for something like that to happen.

"Queen Lupis..."

Scenes of days past, when he and his friend Mikhail Vanash served a young Lupis Rhoadserians, flashed through his mind. They were the finest days he'd ever experienced as a knight in service to his sovereign. They were better days, when he could say with confidence that he would live and die for his kingdom.

But now, it all feels so hollow.

Vector smiled self-deprecatingly. It was the kind of smile only a man seeking a place to die could make. However, a certain letter would soon arrive that would change his fate in a major way.

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Record of Wortenia War: Volume 13

by Ryota Hori

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